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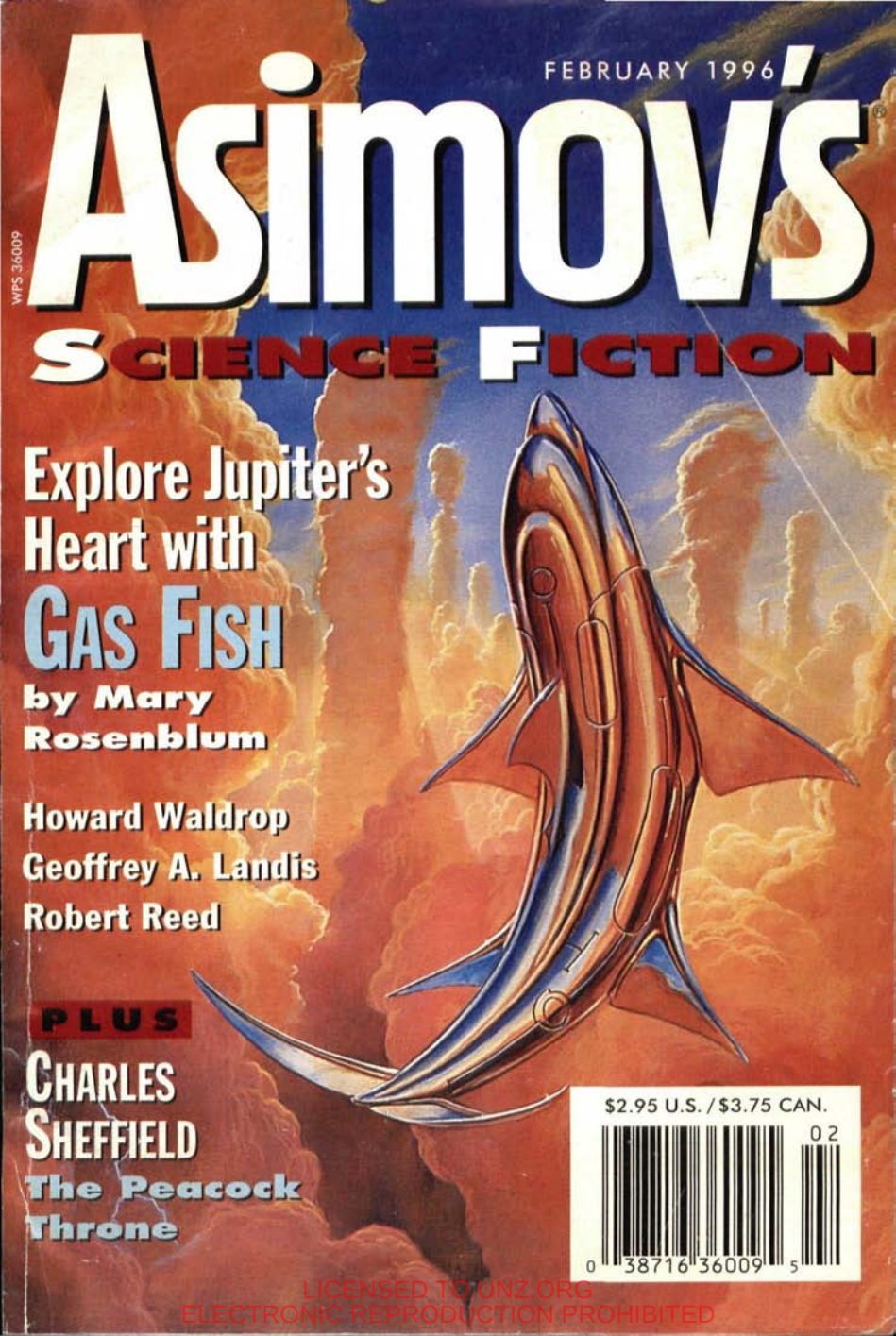

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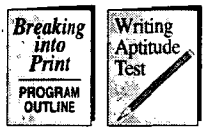

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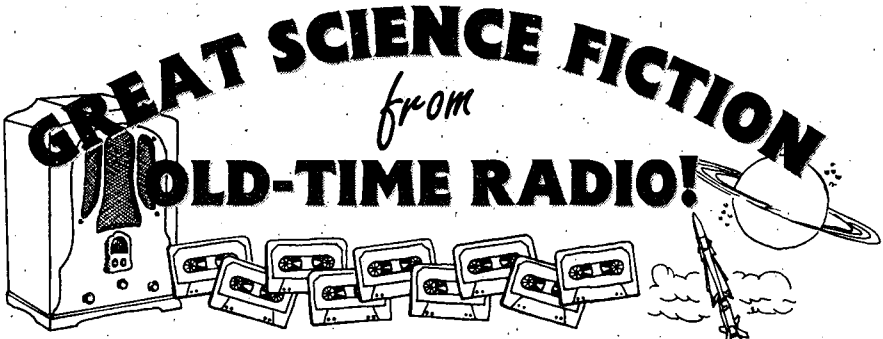

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

GODS ALMIGHTY

I am not the confirmed and outspoken atheist that Isaac Asimov was; but, like him, I have never managed to affiliate myself with any organized religious group, and for most of my life I've been looking with bemusement and incomprehension (and some occasional cynicism) at the whole phenomenon of religious faith.

Isaac simply had no use for religion. He regarded religious belief as superstition, and organized religions as instruments of ignorance and repression. "I have never, in all my life, not for one moment, been tempted toward religion of any kind," he wrote in his final biographical work, *I. Asimov,* which was published shortly after his death in 1992. "The fact is that I feel no spiritual void. I have my philosophy of life, which does not include any aspect of the supernatural and which I find totally satisfying. I am, in short, a rationalist and believe only that which reason tells me is so."

My own upbringing and educational path followed Isaac's in ways that were astonishingly similar, as we occasionally liked to point out to each other—we were both Jewish boys from Brooklyn, wise guys a lot too smart for our own good, who went off to college at eerily young ages (both of us to Columbia, fifteen years apart) and became successful science fiction writers with equal precocity. (Isaac had published his classic story "Nightfall" by the time he was twenty-one; at the same age I had already won my first Hugo.) Neither of us had managed to find any spiritual or emotional comfort in the religion into which we were born—Judaism—and neither of us had ever been tempted to enroll in any Christian sect or anything more esoteric.

Isaac did, however, spend a great deal of time *studying* the phenomenon of religion, since religion is, of course, an important factor in human history and anything that was important in history was of interest to Isaac. He didn't believe, but he wanted to understand. And so he wrote no less than six books on the Bible, including the magisterial *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*; he produced an annotated edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* that reflected his considerable knowledge of Christian theology; and he was well versed also in the Greek and Norse myths, which are, of course, religious in nature. (It was, in fact, childhood readings of just those myths that led both Isaac and me away from the religion of our families: we both became convinced, he in the 1920s and me in the early

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1940s, that the miraculous tales of the Bible were made-up myths just like the tales of Odin and Zeus, every bit as entertaining and every bit as fictional.)

And, like Isaac, I too have studied many religions deeply—always as an outsider, in my case partly out of a love of scholarship and partly in an attempt to understand why religion has no hold on my soul. This curiosity and this bewilderment both have played central roles in my fiction. Again and again, the characters of my novels have gone on quests for some sort of understanding of the supernatural, of the transcendental. Sometimes they plunge eagerly into what they find; sometimes they turn in horror away from it. I made my most explicit statement of these problems, I suppose, in two novels written back to back (*The Face of the Waters*, 1991, and *Kingdoms of the Wall*, 1993), in which my protagonists come to diametrically opposed conclusions: the hero of *Face of the Waters* ultimately surrenders himself to metaphysical engulfment, whereas the narrator of *Kingdoms of the Wall* goes in search of his gods, finds them in the most literal way, and is not pleased by what he discovers.

In the course of pondering these matters and writing these books, I've amassed a considerable library of works on religious subjects. Which leads me to the book I want to discuss today—a book I didn't even remember that I owned, until I stumbled on it inadvertently while looking for something else entirely. It's an obscure and very

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probably now hard to find work that provides, in a charming way, an example of what both Isaac and I found so fascinating and so personally off-putting about the phenomenon of religious belief.

I speak of Manfred Lurker's *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons,* a book published originally in Germany in 1984, and in English in 1987 by the firm of Routledge & Kegan Paul. It is precisely what its title says it to be: 394 pages of alphabetical listings of the gods and demons that mankind has managed to imagine for itself (or to discover, let us concede, through divine revelation), beginning with Aatxe and ending with Zu. This is followed by an appendix listing the various gods by their functions and spheres of competence (divine messengers, mother goddesses, gods of death, etc.) and a second appendix arranging them by their physical attributes (panther-gods, pig-gods, snail-gods) and other defining characteristics of appearance.

For the would-be fantasy or science fiction writer, it's a wonderful compendium of imaginative imagery and wild philosophical conceptualization. For the unbeliever, the Isaac Asimov or the Robert Silverberg, it's also a profoundly sobering reminder of what we see as human gullibility, human credulousness, human folly. It's also a great deal of fun. A few examples:

Here's Egres, a fertility god worshipped by the ancient Finns. His particular area of responsibility was turnips. The Finnish turnip farmer, hoping for a bountiful crop, paid homage to Egres in ways that we hardly dare guess; but the turnip-god's congregation has, I suspect, relatively few members today.

And here is Kis, a god once venerated in the Egyptian town of Kusae. His name means "the tamer," and he is portrayed as a man who holds two creatures—giraffes, or sometimes snakes—by their long necks as a way of pacifying them. Any god who can quiet a snake by holding its neck, or who could, perhaps, hold a giraffe's neck in one hand and a snake's in the other, would come in handy in today's world of difficult political tasks. Could Kis, I wonder, persuade our squabbling Democrats and Republicans to come up with a balanced budget?

Then we have Sarkany, a weather-demon of the early Hungarians. This Magyar marvel had seven or nine heads, carried a saber, and came forth on horseback, waving the planet Venus around as he went about his work of bringing storms and turning people into stones. I try to stay indoors when Sarkany is making his rounds; it's one of the benefits of the free-lance life that you can work at home, and I take full advantage of it.

A particularly pretty one is Vanth, a female demon of the Etruscan underworld, one of the messengers of death. She's got a large eye on the underside of each wing—a reminder that Vanth is everywhere at once, keeping an eye on everything. Vanth is a

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watch-demon watching *you*.

She's not nearly as spooky, though, as the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, whose gigantic stone statue once brought gasps of amazement from me in the great archaeological museum in Mexico City. Coatlicue as I saw her in Mexico was a nightmarish figure ten feet high, six feet wide and thick, with terrible clawed feet, a skirt of writhing serpents, a necklace made of human hands and hearts, and an appalling Lovecraftian face of plainly extraterrestrial origin that I won't even attempt to describe. The role of this monster in Aztec life? Why, she was the goddess of birth, the beloved mother of the culture-hero Quetzalcoatl.

And so it goes, as I've said, from Aatxe to Zu. [Aatxe, let me tell you without further ado, is Basque, an evil spirit in the form of a bull, who comes forth on stormy nights disguised as a human and makes trouble for the unwary. As for Zu, down at the far end of the alphabetical pantheon, he is, strangely enough, an evil demon also, a Mesopotamian storm-bird who steals the tablets of fate in order to make himself the master of the gods, but is put in his place by the warlike Ninurta (who, when he isn't vanquishing unruly demons, causes herds of cattle to flourish and fields to be fertile and productive).]

The catalog is endlessly fascinating. And it must represent only a fraction of the total divine population this planet has managed to spawn. The gods of the Cro-Magnon and Neanderthals are not represented here, nor will they, I suppose, ever be. Nor will we find the thousands of divinities whose worship came and went in pre-literate or non-literate societies without any record of their might and power being left behind.

But there's plenty in this book to engage the thoughtful and wondering mind. Who or what were the formidable Jabru, Jagaubis, Janguli, Jarovit, Julunggul, Jurojin, and Jyotiska? You'll find them all here, with the more familiar Janus, Jehovah, Juno, and Jupiter interspersed among them. Zababa, Zalmoxis, Zaltys, and Zam? They're on the page before Zeus, who precedes Zocho, Zotz, and our old friend Zu. And, yes, Amenominakanushi and Ameretat and Amm, Bangputys and Bebellahamon and Boldogasszony, Caturmaharajas and Cernunnos and Culsu: each one gets his or her or its paragraph in this astonishing collection of deities.

What a tribute to foolishness and credulity, as Isaac might have said! Or, as one might hear from someone less hostile to the religious impulse than he was, What a record of the human yearning for the answers to ultimate questions of destiny and purpose! Either way, Lurker's *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses* is an instructive and awesome compilation that illustrates the richness of the human imagination. Track it down somewhere: it's worth the hunt. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Editors,

Ursula Le Guin's masterpiece of a story, "A Woman's Liberation" in the July issue left me trembling. I have always felt the need for science fiction to take on important social issues, and her story does so like none I've ever read in this magazine. As I read the horrific details of enslavement on the vivid worlds she created, I was bluntly reminded that the plight of her female characters was (and in some cases, still is) experienced right here at home.

I was glued to the magazine and could not put the story down. I hope Ms. Le Guin is recognized by the SF community as a brilliant author and social commentator.

Jeremy Clement
—from the internet
groove@scn.org

Dear *Asimov's*:

Wow!! I am still quivering in the throws of an anachronistic literary orgasm. What has happened to me? Well, I guess it started off like any golden age space opera:

I was down in Orange County (California to those whose universe doesn't extend beyond Elma Mae's diner) last weekend visiting family, knowing full well that I had already consumed my monthly ration of *Analog* and *F&SF* immediately after they reached my mail box. I was about to face an evening alone with family and no escapist fiction to save me (I could always count on the auto-lock feature of the "tube that stole our minds" to keep them totally unaware of my presence), when our dinner stroll chanced to lead us past a local B. Dalton's.

Under the guise of grabbing a newspaper to find local movie times (and a bleak offering it was, as usual), I ducked inside and quickly found the "sci-fi" section of the magazine rack and searched for ANYTHING better than reruns of *Murder She Wrote*.

As I scanned the racks (why DO they group SF, Fantasy, and poetry together with psychic phenomena?), my eyes fell upon the August issue of *Asimov's*.

Ahh, *Asimov's!!* An old friend . . . *Asimov's*, whose first issue or forty lies yellowing in buried, but not forgotten, boxes in places where a not-so-short string of not-so-significant others would have much rather have had empty space.

Asimov's, whose early (aw shucks) days were punnishly perfect and The Good Doctor and Janet both wrote FUN stuff and the universe was a great enchanted place to be in. Sure it could kill you, but how else could you come up with such great exit lines? *Asimov's*, one of the last to hold on to the premise

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that reading can be fun as well as intellectually stimulating. *Asimov's,* where Martin Gardner's puzzles were so much more delightful than his politics, but that's okay since we were so busy finding flaws in one that we hardly noticed the other (you choose).

And *Asimov's,* where we could always count on the brilliantly (and damned enjoyably) chronicled opinions, observations and musings of a true master.

Unfortunately, in the last couple of years before I let my subscription run out, I would come away from an issue feeling that I had just been to a touchie-feelie "aren't we deep and interesting people" convention with special attention paid to current political correctness.

Well, as a Campbellian warrior against the status quo, who believes that limits are made to be stretched and Utopias are for the Opiately Challenged, I found this quite unrewarding and unstimulating, but could still not leave the Good Doctor. Then he left us.

About that time, I looked at my backlog of unread monthlies and yours was the high stack, so I said "Why?" Having no answer, I let my subscription lapse (but did finally catch up on reading them all). I wasn't a BAD magazine . . . it just didn't pack the fun or the satisfaction that it used to.

Which brings me (finally) back to last Sunday. As you can tell, I glanced through the T.O.C. and found a lot of old friends there—both writing and staffing. What the hell—I was bored.

HOLY Guacamole!! I've got to dust off my old copy of *I Will Fear No Evil,* because somewhere in there, must be a clue on how he did it. How did the Dean transcend the great barrier and come back to write again under the name of G. David Nordley? (Or is Virginia just fooling around with us?)

I read a Nordley story a few months ago in one of the aforementioned publications, and had similar thoughts. "One shot luck," I thought. Nope, This guy has GOT it! This is the early Anson Man down to a science, complete with the impetuous "Just DO It!" (A few decades before Nike.)

Well, whatever it is, and whyever it is, if you promise to publish more Nordley (and maybe a Connie Willis or two, please, please!!) I'll renew immediately, without finishing this issue. (Well actually, even if you reply by e-mail, you'll probably be too late for that—I'm going to attack the rest of this one with renewed vigor.)

BTW, "Dawn Venus" has all the taste of a prelude to a novel. Is this his intention (I hope, I hope)? He really makes the characters come alive. Too many modern writers, in an attempt to make their characters REAL, forget to make them characters. Real people are, on the whole, fairly boring (but loveable). Give me some more of that good ol' bigger than life, good guy wins, space opera that I can finish with a resounding YEAH!!!

Well, back to the issue at hand.

Bob Faw
San Bernardino, CA

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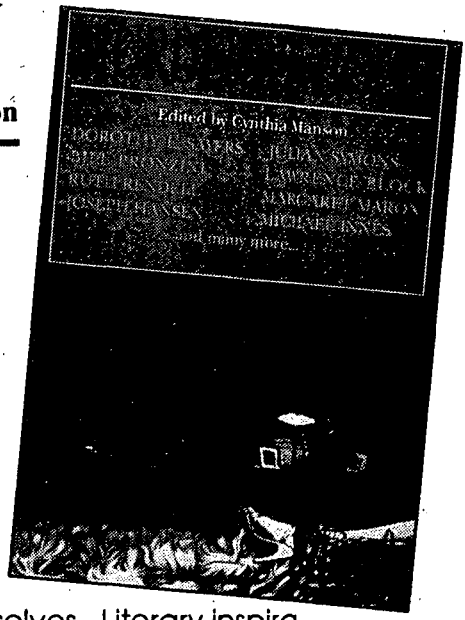
Edited by Cynthia Manson



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To the Editor,

Robert Silverberg's August editorial "The Millennium Is Almost Here" is a prime example of See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil.

Far from becoming a utopia, this world is starting to resemble Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. Back then, fascism started in Italy and spread to Germany, Spain and then every country conquered by Hitler. Today, those "medieval-minded theocrats," meaning the rulers of Iran and Sudan, don't have to justify anything to their subjects; just make them support the Islamic Revolution as if their lives depend on it.

The Soviet Union had nuclear weapons, but as evil as it was it wasn't insane. It didn't want to be destroyed. The Children of Khomeini want to cleanse the world of our "unclean" presence and don't care if they destroy themselves with us! You can't compare Islamic fundamentalism to any other dictatorial system with the exception of Hitler's National Socialism, which had to be destroyed militarily because the German people supported it right up until Hitler killed himself.

Just as it was in the '30s, the governments of the world think that they can compromise with Evil. Countries are falling all over each other trying to sell Iran what it needs to try and enslave the world. Here in America support for Iran spreads like a stain across the political spectrum. Both Patrick Buchanan and Cal Thomas have claimed compatability for the extreme Right's goals with those of radical Islam. Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam now supports Iran like it supported Libya in the mid-'80s. On the Left, the Politically Correct crowd rushes to the defense of terrorists in the name of "tolerance." Every time Iran tells *Time Magazine* that it isn't as radical as it was when Khomeini was alive, they fall for it.

I would suggest to Mr. Silverberg that he dig out his copy of *Omni Magazine* for May 1980 and read "Some of My Best Friends are Americans," and pray to God that the millennium depicted there doesn't come true. May nobody ever have cause to fear the arrival of Friday.

Wallington Simpson, Jr.
Montebello, NY

Dear Editors,

"Dawn Venus" by G. David Nordley: A good story with a provocative idea. I am not sure that it is possible to dive from space onto a planet's surface, and I doubt that Venus will ever be terraformed, but I was intrigued.

"Take Me to the Pilot" by Paul Di Filippo: A wonderful adventure story and an interesting alternate universe idea. Of course, I loved *Buckaroo Banzai,* too. (And I like Di Filippo's criticism column, too. I get the feeling that he and I are kindred spirits.)

"The Phantom of Dunwell Cove" by Charles Sheffield: Not really science fiction, but then I love a good mystery on occasion, and this was one. But now I must hunt

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through *Ellery Queen* to see if I can find a science fiction story.

"Rocket Ghosts" by Wil McCarthy: A good story. I'm afraid that this is the direction the space program is headed. Modern written science fiction doesn't seem to attract people into science anymore. Thank goodness for *Star Trek!*

"The Death of Beatrix Potter" by Candyce Byrne: This is the only story of the issue I didn't like. It is fantasy, not science fiction. Of course, as a child, I didn't like Peter Cottontail, either.

"Fault Lines" by Nancy Kress: An excellent story. The main theme, making connections one person to another, is nicely explored using the idea of a drug that makes those connections more easily made.

James T. MacMullen
—from the internet
jmacmull@viking.dvc.edu or
tmacmull@ix.netcom.com

Dear Editors:

The following is a comment to be forwarded to Robert Silverberg, author of the editorial "The Millennium Is Almost Here,"which appeared in the August '95 issue of *Asimov's*.

First, sir, I would like to say that I am a fan of yours, having particularly enjoyed the novelization of the shorter works of Isaac Asimov, the first science fiction author to be called my favorite. However, I write now to express dismay at some of the odd inconsistencies in your editorial, "The Millennium Is Almost Here."

You write "the sorry century now ebbing away has been dominated by those who believed that the promotion of some particular -ism takes higher priority [than people being better fed, healthier, happier]." I agree that such has been the sad legacy of the modern age, but I have to wonder at your understanding at the cause of the disappearance of such attitudes. The implication of your article is that capitalISM has saved the world from -ISM's. To state this so blithely and not see the contradiction in it is astounding.

Furthermore, you write that new hotels and factories "contribute toward the general welfare of their countries; people will be better fed, healthier, happier. Is that not the ultimate goal of the political state?" I would disagree with this passage primarily because I don't believe that should be the ultimate goal of the political state. We could all be physically healthy, happy and well-fed after receiving lobotomies, but without freedom and intelligence what are these comforts worth? I am a proponent of freedom-insured democracy, not wealth, though if the two can be combined, all the better.

More importantly, I would disagree that hotels and factories necessarily bring wealth to the people. True, they tend to raise the general wealth of the country in which they are located (though not always), but that raise in wealth is certainly not uniform. Child labor is an incredible problem in the world, with children younger than

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ten years of age being made to work, in some cases, over twelve hours a day, with no regard on the part of the employer to health and safety issues for the workers. If, as you say, "economic determinism" actually worked to increase the standard of living for the workers, then one would think that a country that allows such dire economic practices would not be able to compete in the global market, but the contrary is the case. More and more products on American shelves are imported from Southeast Asia and the Middle East where such practices are common, and the owners of such businesses are flourishing. You mentioned the use of "Boycotts and sanctions," against such practices, and that would work if it were used, but most people simply don't care about the plight of a nine-year-old in Turkey as long as they can get their imported rug at a low price.

I am not a communist, but capitalism in the hands of the few is no better than totalitarianism, and is in fact totalitarianism. I favor a new approach altogether, which still utilizes capitalism but puts it into the hands of the individual, not the corporate entity. The future, as I see it, is not a place of multinational corporations controlled by an oligarchy of a few, but of employee-owned businesses and freelance contractors, all in control of their own economic destinies and decisions.

And so, I don't disagree with you concerning the joy of watching -isms fade away. But they must all go, including capitalism, and people will attain a new form of individualized self-rule (call it individualized capitalism), which in my mind is simply an extension of democracy and humanism. The millennium may be at hand, but I hope it won't be ushered in by hospitals and factories. I'd prefer to see it ushered in by individual human beings who have finally been given the power to protect their own interests.

Paxton Daryl Branson
—from the internet
PAXD@aol.com

Gentlefolk,

I liked Gary Port's suggestion in the September Letters column that publishers offer fiction in electronic format and charge for downloading fees. It seems as if the publishing world must go this way eventually: mailing costs keep rising; personal libraries run out of storage space; print publishing uses up trees.

There is still the problem of reading comfort, however. Sitting in front of a screen just isn't as cozy as curling up with a favorite book on the couch, or in bed. Laptops are more portable, yet still heavier and more cumbersome than print books. I'd love to see a portable reader similar to the "plaque books" described in Julian May's Galactic Milieu series. Compact, flat sheets of hard plastic with a slot for inserting "flecks" containing the text, they have a couple of pressure-sensitive buttons on the corners for paging up and down. They're reusable, and

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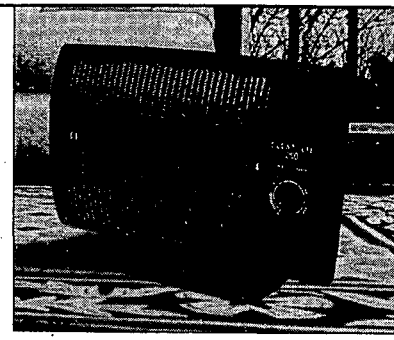

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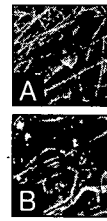

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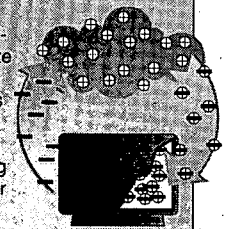

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easily programmable for large print. They won't get dog-eared from being carried in a purse, or split their spines after three or four readings.

Who knows, someday soon I may download the next issue of *Asimov's* from the net and read it on a screen the size of a sheet of notebook paper!

Jane Walter
—from the internet
WalterFmly@AOL.com

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

From the very first issue of *Asimov's*, the first thing I have always read has been the editorial, written for so many years by the Good Doctor and now by his most worthy successor, you. I really want to thank you for the September 1995 issue because, like you, those stories first introduced me to science fiction.

I never became a writer but I have been for forty-five years an avid reader—and for the past few years one of my major guidelines to picking good science fiction to read has been this magazine, the stories, the authors it has introduced, and the book reviews. Your Reflections was like a home-coming for me and I am buying the book, *Adventures in Space and Time*, again as soon as I can.

For everyone else: the magazine continues to be excellent and to provide me with wonderful reading moments every month. Keep up the good work.

Wanna Hite
Gwinn, MI

Dear People,

Regarding Mr. Silverberg's response to Lela Buis's letter to the editor in the October issue: What????

Oh, I agree, adult women do read nearly every genre published, but we also read science fiction. I don't believe any true exceptions exist—we read it all. Yes, I read the *Star Trek* books, as well as what you'd call the real science fiction, fantasy, etc. Please note, however, that I had never read a "romance" book until I made the wonderful discovery of what they call futuristic romance, a subgenre that seems to be strong and growing.

I know for a fact that I'm not the only woman reading straight science fiction. I've been communicating with many other women through letters, telephone calls and face-to-face discussions about the direction publishing is taking now and in the months and years to come. We want *good* science fiction, good mystery, good writing, period! The market won't disappear for any genre, especially science fiction, if that's what we see on the shelves. I know. I buy so many books that Walden's calls me to see if I've been in an accident when they haven't had to send me a bonus check every two weeks or so.

Thanks for paying attention to this reader. Are there any more of you closet SF readers hiding out there? Let's hear from you, too.

Cherie K. Singer
Reader, Book Buyer and a Woman
Brookfield, WI

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Dear Mr. Silverberg,

In your Oct. '95 editorial you worried about and brought forth cogent ideas why the readership of SF & F is aging. As a forty-year-old mother who has been reading this genre since I was nine, let me shed some light on the subject. Let's start with *Little Fuzzy* by H. Beam Piper and wonderfully illustrated by Michael Whelan. It was out for a couple years when my son was about two. The book is for an eight or nine year old. I bought not one but two copies of it (all they had) and sent a copy to a friend of mine with children. That was the only book I saw for years that was published in this genre for children. Remembering with pleasure the Tom Swift series, my husband and I sought the books out at a used book sale. We found them and some "defender of the earth" stuff from cartoons older than our son.

Then one day, in the local library, I saw *Commander Toad* by Jane Yolen. Perfect for the age of four or five with subtle digs at favorite stories. I laughed through these wonderful books then read them aloud to my son. He loved them. He'd seen all the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* movies plus *Buckaroo Banzai* and had been watching *Dr. Who, Blake's Seven,* and, of course, *Star Trek.*

He is now in third grade, last year we introduced him to R.A.H. with *Red Planet.* We read it to him. (Yes, he is almost nine and we still read to him at night—he loves it and we get to re-read stories we like.) We are currently on *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* having already read the first two Narnia books. We have more R.A.H. and Norton ready for him.

When in book stores, we look for "our" genre in the children's section. Lately, the only thing I've seen for his age group is the *Star Trek* series aimed at children.

I humbly suggest that the readership is aging because parents have been unable to introduce their young children to the genre. I also suggest that many of the works by R.A.H., Norton, Piers Anthony, C.S. Lewis, and Edgar Rice Burroughs were for juveniles. At least thirty years ago they were and today they still are juvenile books. Fortunately for our son, we have over three thousand books in our house, most in the SF & F genre. Unfortunately for the majority of readers, this is not so. And these books are very hard to find today. We as readers and/or writers of this genre hope that young teens will find books on their own. As you, perhaps, did. With the climbing rate of illiteracy in this country, why leave anything to chance? More books like Jane Yolen's and lately Ursula K. Le Guin's "Catwings" story in *Spider* are needed. They are needed NOW. The stories from our youth are still excellent stories to introduce a child to this genre. We, as reading public, may have to badger the publishers to re-publish them, but I predict it will be worth it.

Cheryl B. Martin
—from the internet
cmar7@aol.com
Atlanta, GA

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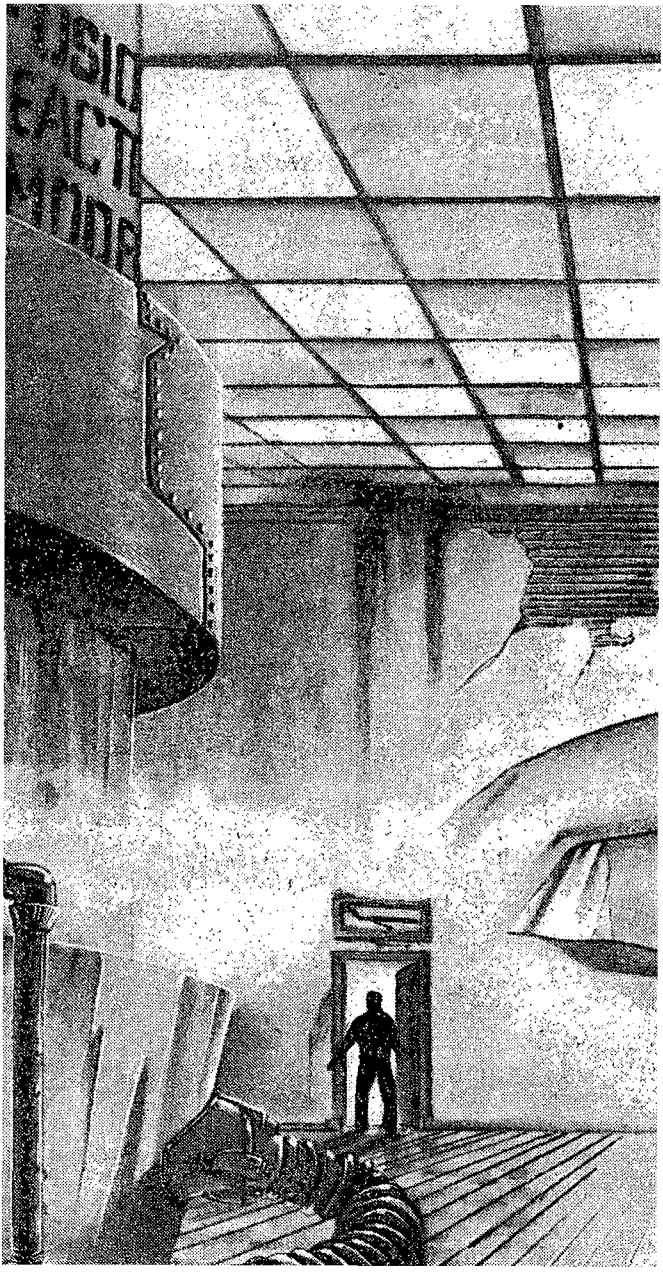

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Charles Sheffield

THE PEACOCK THRONE

Charles Sheffield's most recent novel, *The Ganymede Club*, was published in December by Tor Books. Mr. Sheffield's next two projects are set in his and Jerry Pournelle's Jupiter series. Both authors collaborated on the first novel, *Higher Education*, and Tor will release it this summer. The second book, *The Billion Dollar Boy*—Mr. Sheffield's solo novel—will be out in the fall. The author is currently at work on *Forever*—a novel for Bantam "that starts today and finishes at the end of the universe, with the same characters throughout."

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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Peter Cook died a few weeks ago. I never met him, and I didn't catch the announcement, but when a friend mentioned it to me the next day, casually over dinner at The Pines of Rome, I felt an odd visceral shock. Cook was just about my own age. He was one of the people who defined my sense of what is funny, starting way back with the "Beyond The Fringe" review and continuing right through his disastrous (and un-funny) appearance as a TV butler. The last time I actually saw him in a movie was his cameo role as an ancient clergyman in *The Princess Bride.*

The dinner conversation that night swirled on at once to other things, but Cook's death lingered at the back of my mind. I can see no reason for that. Everyone must die, sooner or later. But I suspect that if Peter Cook had not died, and if I had not for that reason been for the next few days somewhat preoccupied with intimations of mortality, the rest of this might not have happened.

But I was, and although I was busy when the phone rang and I would normally have allowed my answering machine to take over, my residual sense of unease took over instead and I picked up the receiver.

"Christopher Dutton?" said a quiet male voice.

"Yes."

"A mutual friend suggested that I give you a call. If you have some free time in the next couple of days, I would like to take you to lunch or to dinner."

There is no such thing as free time. It is our most precious and irreplaceable commodity. Supposedly there is also no such thing as a free lunch. It did not seem a good idea to offer these trite thoughts to a stranger. Instead, I said, "Who's the mutual friend?" And, when he told me the name, "Okay. What else did he say?"

"That you tend to have your own agenda."

"Don't we all?"

"I think so." He laughed. "I can live with that."

"I'll have to look at my calendar. Can I call you back?"

"Sure." He gave me a number and added, "My name is Roland Pierce."

"I'll call you in a few minutes."

I would, but only after I had made another call or two. The 351 prefix on his number already told me a lot, but I wanted to cross-check. "Convergence of evidence," it's called. You view something from several different directions, sniff its perfume, prick your finger on a thorn, and decide as a working hypothesis that it is probably a rose.

Roland Pierce was a more difficult case. Was he a rose, or not? Our mutual friend was away in St. Petersburg (Russia, not Florida) and could not be reached. Two agency friends that I called had not heard of Pierce, but they promised to make internal phone calls and network the name.

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I waited, not patiently, for a reply. You can theoretically reach anyone in the world by three person-to-person-to-person calls, but that fact is misleading. Make the wrong calls, and you will bounce around forever.

After fifteen minutes the word came back: Roland Pierce was a definite rose, though one who worked for a division far removed from any with which I had been involved.

So why might he want to buy me lunch?

My friends did not know. I did not know. What I did know was that given his background and affiliation he would explain only in person, and only in an environment of his choosing.

Why would I *let* him buy me lunch? That's a really good question. I was busy, I had refused three lucrative consulting jobs in four weeks, and I have more money than available time.

It hurts to admit that I may also have more curiosity than sense.

Roland Pierce was dressed in a grey suit that looked a little too cool for January, a white button-down shirt, and a blue Jerry Garcia tie that probably cost him forty-five dollars. He was sitting down when I arrived, so I had no chance to verify that his shoes were polished to a regimental shine, that his socks matched his shoes and suit, and that his fly was zipped. I'm sure it was. Add in abundant curly grey hair, a trim mustache, and an Islands tan, and you had an undeniable charter member of the League of Gentlemen.

I don't know what he thought of me and my attire, and I was not about to ask. We shook hands. I sat down and waited.

He poured white wine, already ordered and chilled. "How is your Farsi, Mr. Dutton?" he said.

It was a fine and unexpected opening gambit.

"Pathetic," I said. "It's fifteen years since I was in Iran."

"I know. But you have a habit of scribbling notes in Farsi during technical meetings."

If I had checked up a little on him, he had checked far more on me. Well, that was fair. He was the one with the resources.

"It allows me to express my ruder and more critical thoughts," I said. "Other people use shorthand. Fluency in spoken language is totally different."

"I agree. But you never really lose it, do you?" He spoke as though from personal experience. "It just hides away somewhere in your brain. Give yourself a couple of intensive weeks of speaking and listening, and it wanders back."

I have a theory of the brain that addresses that odd phenomenon, but it didn't seem like the time and place. I said nothing, and after a few seconds he went on, "And your knowledge of nuclear reactors, how's that?"

"Worse than the Farsi. It's twenty years out of date, rather than just fifteen."

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"You still keep Weinberg and Wigner's *Physical Theory of Neutron Chain Reactors* in your library."

It was a statement, not a question.

"I also have *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Doctor Dolittle,* but I don't consult them."

"Ah, but they are undoubtedly on bookshelves in your family room." Pierce was holding his wine to the light and admiring its pure gold, and he chose not to look at me. "But Weinberg and Wigner, and Haïm's big Persian-English dictionary, they are in your study. That's where you keep reference books that you use all the time."

Not just more checking, but *a lot* more checking. I had never seen the slightest sign that my house had been entered without my knowledge, but that was merely the sign of professionals. It meant that an observer from Pierce's organization would also be here in the restaurant.

"Don't you think we ought to get to the point?" I said.

"Certainly. I did not want you to think that we had been lacking in due diligence." Roland Pierce smiled at me as though to say that such a notion was quite unthinkable. I smiled at him, to show that I knew there had been a dozen major screw-ups in his organization within the past five years, beyond those that had made it to the media. After a moment his smile faded and he went on, "Computer-based information systems have come along enormously in the past decade. It is now possible to feed in a diverse set of requirements: personal mobility, experience in Iran, a working knowledge of Farsi, a background in physics, suitable clearances, a clean passport, and a second profession unrelated to my group's interests and activities. The system will seek out the individual who best fits the requirements, in a well-defined mathematical sense."

"You ought to have fed in a few more constraints. The individual should enjoy international travel rather than disliking it, need money, and have no other commitments on his time."

"You go to England an average of twice a year. You once made eight trips to Iran in a single ten-month period."

"I go to England to see family. I also once rode a twenty-five mile bicycle time trial in one hour flat. That would kill me if I tried it today."

"You do not need money," he went on, as though I had just agreed with him on the first point. "But in our experience the promise of financial gain is the least successful of all inducements." He managed to force a smile and beat me to the punch: "Although as you know we recently uncovered a disastrous and highly publicized counter-example to that principle within our own organization.

"As for your commitments, you just last week completed and mailed a book. In such a case you normally indulge in unrelated other activities for a month or two before undertaking another major project."

"Are you telling me that what you have in mind is a minor project?"

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"My apologies. Before undertaking another major *writing* project. You would do little writing in this case, although it in fact provides the logic for your presence. However, I am getting ahead of myself. Are you aware that Russia has offered to sell light-water nuclear reactor technology to Iran, and that the United States is much troubled by that idea?"

"I heard Warren Christopher say as much, in a television interview."

"Then you might think that the news that Iran has changed its mind, and now professes no interest whatsoever in such purchases, would please us. In fact, quite the opposite is true. We believe that Iran has lost interest only because it has the key to something more disturbing. Are you familiar with the idea of cold fusion?"

"Enough to know it's total nonsense. Sheldon Glashow said it best."

I saw a slight uncertainty on his face, like the first smudge on polished furniture. Could his briefing have been less than perfect? "Glashow? Ah, of our organization?"

"Sheldon Glashow is a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. When Pons and Fleischmann first announced the discovery of cold fusion at a press conference in Utah, Glashow realized at once that it was bogus. I heard him give a talk very soon afterward that ended with, 'Never trust a four-letter state.'"

"I see." Pierce had regrouped even before I finished the first sentence. "Let me drop the term 'cold fusion,' in favor of simple fusion. Something is going on in Iran. All we have at the moment are bits and pieces, but we believe that they have discovered the secret to commercial fusion power. In fact, they have a working fusion reactor."

"Why bits and pieces? You must have dozens of contacts inside the country."

"Perhaps." He weakened. "Of course we do. They are hearing a great deal. But I doubt that any one of them understands it. In fact, reading their reports I am sure that they do not. We need someone who knows the country well, someone who also knows enough science to discard what is patently false. Someone like you, Mr. Dutton."

"Iran isn't Washington," I said, "where if you probe in the wrong place or say the wrong thing you can duck behind the First Amendment. Salman Rushdie is still in hiding. Do you know about SAVAK?"

"The 'Organization for the Information and Security of the Country.' A splendidly innocent name for a secret police."

"Iran still has SAVAK—not officially, I know, but it's there. Something like SAVAK is too valuable to throw away just because a new government takes over."

"Of course. If my own organization did not exist, it would be necessary to invent us. However, in your case I see neither danger nor difficulty. It is not that you would have a cover of being a writer. You *are* a writer. If they question that, and ask you to generate a story or an article while you are there, do you doubt that you would be able to do so?"

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"Not at all." But write *where?* I thought. Rotting in some Iranian jail? I recalled Van Meegeren, locked up after the Second World War, forced to paint a Vermeer because the fake Vermeers he had sold to the Nazis during the war were so good that he had been charged as a collaborator. "I could write if I had to," I said. "But what on God's green earth makes you think that I would leave this"—I gestured to the Puligny Montrachet, the breadsticks, and the creamy asparagus soup that had just been served—"to go off and risk my head, hat, and ass on a wild goose chase to nowhere?"

Roland Pierce swallowed a first spoonful of soup and dabbed fastidiously at his mustache with the cloth napkin.

"Our mutual friend," he said, "gave it as his opinion that you would be temperamentally unable to resist."

The trip across the Atlantic was entirely normal, with an on-time Heathrow arrival in the bleak grey of a February dawn. After a three-hour nap at my preferred anonymous hotel in Bloomsbury, the day in London was too busy with trivia to leave time for thought. It was only on the second leg, the slow night flight to Teheran via Rome, that the divergence began.

The days of crowded PanAm and IranAir flights, packed to the last passenger seat and beyond, were gone. I occupied a half row on a quarter-filled darkened plane, drowsing and dreaming. I had given Roland Pierce a long list of names, and he had come back with a trace on only three of them. It didn't matter much, because I believed that I knew the whereabouts of all three. I was testing Pierce rather than expecting useful new information. But it left a question. Where were all the rest?

Wanted, living or dead: Reza Marzban, Reza Majd, Reza Tavvakkoli, Khosro Behrooz, Abdol Hekmat, Reza Ferdowsi, and a couple of dozen others. Half the country had been Reza's, named after the Shah's father. What names did they use, now that the *Shahanshah,* the King of Kings, and his whole *Pahlavi* succession were officially a blot on history, a dark stain across the Persian landscape?

Reza Marzban was a navy captain whose final swimming test for his officers had been to take them half a mile off-shore and make them jump overboard. When he left the navy his commanding officer had given him a simple choice: resign under the navy's terms, or be shot. He made at least one sound military decision, and became a civilian. But I could still remember those mad, dark eyes as he drove us all over Teheran, from the great cemetery in the south to the slopes of the Elburz Mountains in the north, boasting of Iran's future, pointing out the grand new buildings that were springing up everywhere, mocking the decadence and weakness of Europe and America—and at the same time criticizing the Shah in a way that made every other Iranian we met cringe away from us, in mortal fear of SAVAK.

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Logically, the revolution would have welcomed him as one of their own. In practice, after a revolution the first act of a new government is to eliminate the insurgents who destroyed the old. Reza Marzban was either out of the country, or he was dead; dead as the exiled Shah, dead as the grandiose visions of Iran as a twenty-first century superpower.

I lay back in my airplane seat and dreamed those dreams again. I saw the cloud-capped palaces, thousand-foot skyscrapers in downtown Teheran (genuine earthquake country, but technology would solve that). I watched in my mind's eye as the desert around the city turned to roses, by the miracle of nuclear-powered desalinization plants and irrigation. I saw the fleets of Concordes and 747's flying in daily or hourly from Europe, Japan, and America, disgorging the beautiful people into the glittering new airport. They stayed in Teheran's world-class hotels, and in the five-star restaurants of the city they dined on caviar from the Caspian, Persian Gulf shrimp, and iced *Piruzi* vodka. I saw—not my dream, but the dream of every red-blooded Iranian male—a dozen blondes in every modern Teheran office, mini-skirted and glamorous in the style made respectable by the *enghelab-e-safid,* the Shah's "White Revolution."

Morning and Mehrabad Airport shattered the vision. On my old visits the place had been insanely busy, with every family member of every passenger at the airport screaming a greeting or wailing goodbye. Now Customs was as inefficient as ever, but Arrivals was almost deserted. The old pulse of excitement and energy had vanished completely. In its place was an air of neglect, of drabness and decay and disillusion.

As a relatively obscure writer I did not merit government greeting or official notice. A conversation with Immigration offered a chance to loosen my rusty tongue, and confirmed that my papers made me good for a two-week stay. Official purpose: travel guides. Then I rode into town in an ancient cab that might well have been the one that took me there the last time. The center of the city was as I remembered it, but no street names today reflected any element of the short-lived Pahlavi "dynasty" (the Shah claimed a twenty-five-hundred-year heritage, but his father was illegitimate and he never knew the identity of his grandfather). I paid the driver in the new currency. It seemed to be the only thing in the city that was new. It made up for that by its cheap appearance.

I had not attempted to make a hotel reservation in advance. It would have anyway been impossible, because the place that I preferred lacked Fax machines and English-speaking staff. In the old days, guests at the Teheran Intercontinental, Hilton, and Sheraton were monitored closely. I could not see that changing merely with a change of regime. The ayatollahs had a degree of suspicion of foreigners that made the Shah look like Mister Rogers.

The Khedmat Hotel, like its up-scale cousins to the north and west, had seen better days. The room I was offered was "the best one in the

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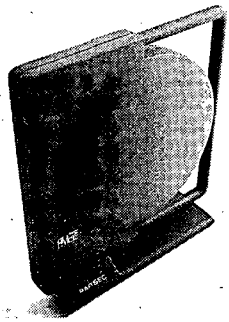

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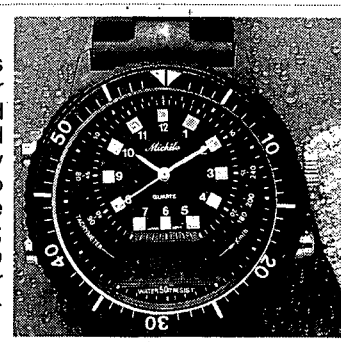

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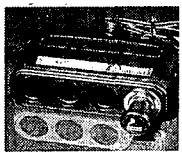

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whole hotel," according to the manager, and I am inclined to believe him. It was clean but shabby. On the floor was a genuine but well-worn Kerman rug. There was of course no telephone.

I unpacked my single bag, lay down on the bed, and slept until two in the afternoon. Then it was time for work. I took a cab and headed north, for Fereshte Avenue. *Fereshte* means angel, but the man I was hoping to see was anything but.

I told the cab to wait and walked up to the heavy wooden door. This was the same house, but how about the occupant?

The door was answered by a young man, maybe twenty-five years old. He was by definition one of the lucky ones. The decade-long war between Iran and Iraq had slaughtered half the youth of the country. Like the girls of Europe after the First World War, the maidens of Iran in this generation would look long and hard for a mate. Many would remain spinsters.

"Yes?" he said, without expression.

"I am seeking Mr. Radegan."

"I am Mr. Radegan."

"Mr. *Abdi* Radegan." And then, on an impulse, "Perhaps your grandfather?"

"What is your name?" he asked. And after I told him, "Aha! He has spoken of you often. One moment." He disappeared, and I went back and paid off the taxi driver.

The man who came to the door wore loose blue pantaloons and house slippers, and he shuffled rather than walked.

"Can it be?" he said. He gazed at me and beyond me. "Is it really?"

"It is." I realized that he was blind. "Father, it has been a long time."

"Too long." He came forward and embraced me, and stared unseeing at my face. "Too long, indeed. Christopher. My testament."

It was what he had called me when we met people, as much as he used my name. He had taught me Farsi, and in his view my speech provided the testament to his skill.

"No worthy testament, Father. It has been so long. My memory went."

He laughed, because to that point we had been speaking English and I had suddenly switched languages. My last phrase, *Yodam raft—my memory went,* was a true Farsi idiom.

"It returns," he said. "And quickly. Come in, come in." And he led his way confidently through the dim-lit interior of the house.

"I am sorry that the treatment did not work," I said, wanting to let him know at once that I was aware of his blindness.

He shrugged philosophically. "It was a long shot. The Americans are devils, but unfortunately they are inefficient devils and cannot grant wishes in exchange for your soul. Better *kur* than *khar*."

Better blind than a donkey. His eyes had troubled him for twenty

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years, since the time when he retired as superintendent of one of Teheran's most populous school districts. His last trip to Europe and the United States had been a move of desperation, but when we met in Washington at the time he was optimistic about the treatment. "Anything that hurts so much must do some good," he had said. But apparently it had not.

We settled into the long living-room. Some things had not changed. A line of statuesque aunts, black-clad and veiled in the traditional *chador,* sat along one wall. For all I knew they had been sitting there since my first visit. They spoke softly not to me or Abdi but to each other, openly eavesdropping on our conversation and giggling for mysterious reasons.

An hour went by while Abdi and I played catch-up. Since our last meeting his life, in a country torn apart by turmoil, religious revolution, jihad, and war, had been far more peaceful than mine. The power centers might shift, but little from outside penetrated the walled villa, with its mulberry trees, stone-flagged courtyard, and cool, calm interior.

He laughed when I reminded him of my first visit, to partake of an early afternoon tea. I was the complete novice to Iranian customs, and I did not realize that it was usual to nibble a little of each dish as it was served. I had eaten everything on my plate, and looked on in dismay as the courses came and came and came. I thought it impolite to refuse. At the end I tottered away unable and unwilling to eat again that day.

This time I knew better, sampled judiciously, and murmured compliments. After the last course had been served Abdi made a slight gesture and the matched set of aunts rose, bade me a polite "*Khoda hafez,*" and left the room. Abdi regarded me with those shrewd, sightless eyes.

"Now, my son. It is strange times to meet again, and here. You wish to talk to me?"

"I do. How are your ears, Father?"

"There are less than there used to be. But they function." Abdi, high school principal and then school superintendent in Teheran, claimed to know the names and faces of ten thousand of his former students. If it was an exaggeration, it was not much of one. I had never been out with him in the old days without a constant stream of respectful greetings from young men and young women. They formed the basis of an information network that put the Baker Street Irregulars to shame.

"I wonder if your ears might listen for me."

"If I ask them to do so. But listen for what?"

Roland Pierce had given me stern instructions to talk to no one about fusion. He had almost certainly known that I was going to ignore him—why otherwise had I given him a list of names? But what could he do? It was my head in the noose, not his.

He could worry, and he was probably doing it. Pierce did not know, as I knew, of Abdi's total honesty.

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And how did I know? Simple. I had long ago tried to recruit him, and failed. Abdi's loyalty to Iran was rock-solid; but it was to Iran's history and people and sacred soil, not to the Shah or to the religious leaders who were now pushing the country back a thousand years.

I told Abdi all I knew, which was precious little. I told him of rumors abroad of a great new discovery; of a power source that would return oil to its rightful place in the world, as the source of petrochemicals instead of energy; of my desire to determine how much of the story was fact and how much was fiction.

He listened in silence, and at the end he shook his head. "Here is another Persian proverb for your collection: 'To protect a secret, place it among a million falsehoods.' No one will know which is real."

"But your ears can find out."

"Perhaps they can. They are intelligent young men. I will ask them."

"Young women, too. You would not neglect those."

That brought a big smile, and a rueful, "My son, it is not from choice. I celebrate my seventy-seventh birthday at New Year."

Abdi, during his tenure as teacher, had done what in America would have brought him disgrace and quick dismissal: he had enjoyed a sexual relationship with some of his former pupils. Not just a few of them. Several hundred, according to rumor. Here in Teheran he was a legend and a sought-after provider of certain advice. The restoration of hymens and the repair of slightly used virgins forms a thriving medical specialty.

"But I take your meaning," he went on. "The ladies too will be my ears—and yours."

He asked at which hotel I was staying. He was astute enough to ask if I was likely to be there.

"I will check in," I said, "at least once every twenty-four hours."

"Give me a couple of days," he said. "Then you will come here again, and perhaps I will have news."

"*Enshallah.*"

"God willing, as always. Good hunting, my son."

As I left I realized that it had been a mistake to dismiss the taxi. In the old days I would have had my driver wait for me, even if it was going to be three or four hours. But in the old days it would hardly have been necessary, since it was easy to find a taxi. Now the street was almost deserted of automobiles.

I could have gone back and asked Abdi to have one of his household drive me downtown. Instead I went to the end of Fereshte Avenue and began to walk south. I told myself that the exercise would do me good. After so many hours of sitting in airplanes I needed to stretch my legs. A quarter of an hour later I began to change my mind. A light snow was falling, and the cold wind at my back came all the way from the snows of the Elburz Mountains. I was only thirty-six degrees from the equator, but

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this was February and I was more than four thousand feet above sea level. When I was able to stop a taxi after twenty-five minutes, and climbed in with the other three Iranian passengers, I felt that my legs and lungs had been stretched quite enough.

"*Takht-e-Tavoos,*" I said. Peacock Avenue, or in literal translation Peacock Throne. Not a bad description for my destination.

I stared around me when I alighted. It was dusk, but I could see that this was a more opulent location than I had expected. She had certainly moved up in the world. The apartment building was tall, with massive double doors. The front desk when I entered contained a big internal switchboard for calling individual apartments. At that switchboard sat a uniformed clerk.

"I am here to visit Victoria Gasparian," I said. "What is her apartment number?"

"Is she expecting you?"

"No. But we are old friends."

"Excuse me, but I must call her before I can give you her apartment number."

As an experiment, I placed a fair-sized note on the marble desk top. He shook his head, and repeated, "I must call *Khonum* Gasparian. What is your name?"

"Christopher Dutton." Iran had truly changed from the old days. Or was I just out of touch, and my bribe too small?

He had picked up the telephone, and was waiting impassively. It took a long time, long enough for me to become convinced that she was out, but at last he said into the phone, "You have a visitor at the front desk. His name is Christopher Dutton." There was a brief pause, then he continued with an unflattering but I suspect accurate description of my appearance. Finally he nodded, put down the telephone, and said, "Apartment 5-C."

I nodded and left the banknote where it was sitting in front of him.

The single elevator was slow and creaking. As it began its stately ascent I wondered how many residents used it. Even in its heyday, Teheran had an electricity supply famous for brownouts and blackouts. The major centers all used their own back-up generators.

She had not waited for me to arrive at her apartment. When the elevator door opened she was there, standing in front of me. I stepped forward, and after a moment's hesitation we gave each other a curiously stiff and formal embrace.

"It is you," she said. "I thought it could not be, even when he described you."

As she led me to the open door of her apartment I glanced sideways and made a quick head-to-toe inventory. The last time I had seen Victoria was in Frankfurt, almost ten years before. She was now forty-one, and the added years had been more than kind. They—or exercise and

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diet—had slimmed and tightened her legs and body and refined the line of her jaw. The lustrous dark eyes, skillfully outlined with *kohl,* were more beautiful than ever in her thinner face. Her hair was still black as jet.

"Vodka?" she said, as I followed her into the apartment.

"I thought that alcohol was forbidden under the ayatollahs."

She gave me in turn a quizzical and evaluating sideways glance. "I am a Christian, not a Moslem. Drink is not *harom* for me. Anyway, everything is forbidden under the ayatollahs." She handed me an eight-ounce tumbler of vodka and ice-cubes, raised her own to her lips, and looked at me over the top of the glass. "Would you want me to give up *everything?*"

"That would be a tragic loss." I raised my tumbler to her. "*Salomati.*"

"To health, and to old friends. You are looking good."

Iranian vodka is the best in the world, even when it has to be bootlegged. While we toasted each other I examined the living-room of her apartment. The two twelve-by-nineteen Persian rugs on the walls would have suggested substantial wealth anywhere else, but here they were commonplace. More impressive were the lacquered cabinets filled with Limoges china, the hundred-gallon aquarium stocked with a rainbow of tropical fish, and the long coffee table with its mosaic inlay of fine Iranian turquoise.

We sat down side by side on a brocade couch, worked with traditional Persian motifs. "Too long," she said, echoing Abdi Radegan. "I have not seen you for too long. Tell me everything—where you are living, what you are doing, why you are here. And I will do the same."

I told her. But not everything. The years fell away easily, and we talked and talked in that curious mixture of English and Farsi that we had always found so pleasing. She had married, after waiting until she was almost thirty-four, a man many years older than she. That did not surprise me. When she was in her mid-twenties I had met her father, and he was then close to eighty.

Her husband had died one year ago, leaving her comfortable financially and in a position to pursue and enjoy her position within his family business. Career women are less rare in Iran than hostile American publicity would have you believe. She was proud of her success. She stated, perhaps a little too pointedly, that she had no desire to re-marry. It would interfere with her career.

"And you?" she asked.

I shook my head. I had no urge to marry again, either. My reasons also had to do with career, I explained, but I did not go into detail.

At eight o'clock I said, "You must be starving. Can I take you out to dinner?"

She gave me a big-eyed mocking glance. "Meaning, you have finished

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the bowl of pistachio nuts and you are still hungry. You have not changed. But I think we will do better to eat here. The restaurants of Teheran are not what they were."

"No Intercontinental?" I said. "No Maharajah? No Ivan?"

She laughed and shook her head. I was mixing together two of our long-ago shared experiences. Once when I was staying at the Intercontinental I took Victoria to lunch there. The best restaurant was on the top floor of the hotel. As we were about to enter the elevator a little man ran forward and said he was sorry, but we could not go upstairs.

"We can't go to *lunch?*" I said.

"Oh," he said, "to lunch." And he waved us on.

Victoria, a respectable secretary, should have been offended at being mistaken for a street hooker (the hotel had their own, and outsiders were not allowed on their turf). But she was well aware of her dazzling appearance. She just laughed and stepped onto the elevator, and the little man gave me a respectful "One lucky fellah" look.

As for Ivan, one of the more improbable features of pre-Ayatollah Teheran was the performer at the Maharajah restaurant. Ivan was a Pakistani with an excellent voice and an American country-and-western repertoire that he had learned by listening to records and tapes. Victoria and I had danced there together for the first time to a Charlie Rich song, "Behind Closed Doors," performed by Ivan. She knew all the words, which was more than I did, and she had sung them in my ear.

Apparently she knew them still. She sang to me now, and she went on, "You are fortunate. Today I bought fresh fish and shrimp. I will cook for you *mahi-va-maigu* with rice. Then, like the song, I will let my hair hang down, and I will turn the lights down low. And you will be astonished at my new skills."

Double meanings were sliding along under the mixture of two languages. I was sliding along with them, under the mixture of jet-lag, high altitude, and multiple vodkas.

Roland Pierce was not my kind of guy, but he was nobody's fool. The information that had come back to him about Victoria Gasparian was scanty, but he had been in the business a long time. I suspect that he had wondered about her name on my list even before he sent off his inquiry.

"What is her role in this?" he had asked me. "She has nothing to do with science, nothing to do with newspapers or writing. I don't see why she should be involved."

"To give me a look at modern Iran from an inside point of view," I said. "Look, before the Shah was kicked out, not one of your people—and there were loads of them in Iran, from Ambassador Helms on down—nobody had any idea that the whole country was ready to blow its lid. The revolution started in the mosques, the last place any of you thought of looking. I decided long ago that Iran is like an onion. You peel off one layer,

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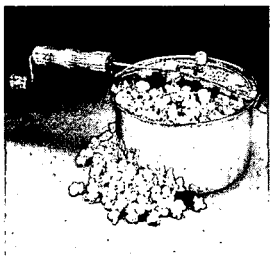

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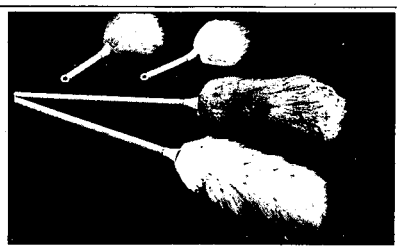

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and you think, now I really know how the place works. Then you find there's another layer beneath, and then another. Finally you realize you are dealing with an infinite number of layers. Whatever I am, I'm not Iranian. I need an Iranian eye."

I thought that sounded pretty good.

"I see," he said. His face remained neutral, but I don't think he swallowed my argument. Which was as it should be, since it was 80 percent bogus. He may be dedicated to liberty, justice, and the American way, but my life includes other things.

"Ah, why should life all labor be?" asked Tennyson.

The answer is, it shouldn't. It should include *mahi-va-maigu,* served with fresh spring salad available in Teheran by the middle of February; and it should include a remark, casually delivered by Victoria as she was serving *makhlut* as dessert, ice-cream with rosewater starch and wild cherry sauce, "I was not intending to go anywhere tonight. But tomorrow night I will be busy."

She had not said, I had not asked, if there was again a man in her life or a woman in mine. Her statement told me that there was indeed a man, but he was *in* her life and not her life. And he would not be here tonight.

Her bedroom reflected her tastes, and no one else's. The only photograph on the bedside table was of her dead parents. Much later, in companionable darkness, I finally asked if she had heard any random rumors about a big Iranian scientific discovery.

"Discovery of what?" she asked.

"Of fusion." I used the English term, and she said, "Fusion? I don't know that word."

"Fusion is like *zoub*." I switched to Farsi, but realized as soon as I spoke that this would not work. Technical terms often do not translate well, and *zoub* means more like melting, or merging.

She reached out to switch on a little night-light, and turned to stare at me quizzically. "Isn't that just what we have been doing?" She smiled and stroked my chin, bristly with a one-day beard. "I have no interest in science, Christopher. You know that. But if I remember I will ask my friends tomorrow. *Zoub* tonight, and *zoub* tomorrow."

Roland Pierce, had he been able to see me, would surely have complained. He had sent me all that way, at large expense, expecting me to work—and look what I was doing instead.

Actually, I was working. I was feeling my way back into the country and the language after a long absence. The meeting with Abdi Radegan had helped a lot, but for real immersion there is nothing that compares with what Iranians call a *farhang-e-mu-e-boland*—a long-haired dictionary. You learn faster, and you enjoy it more.

The following afternoon, though, Victoria kicked me out with orders

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not to appear again until the following evening. I was forced to change my working mode to one that Roland Pierce would approve.

I went to the Khedmat Hotel and checked for messages from Abdi. As I expected, nothing. It was too soon. I went to my room, took a sponge bath, and shaved. And I thought.

Before I left Washington, I had set one absolute rule with Roland Pierce: I would tolerate no interaction of any kind with his Iranian sources, and they would not contact me. In fact, they were not to know of my presence.

He didn't like that, but he understood why. Some of the in-country contacts were surely taking money from both sides.

It was safer this way, but I was reduced to my own resources. I lay down on the bed, and reviewed the "bits and pieces" of informer data that Pierce had found so unsatisfying. It was impossible to make them into a coherent whole, but I could go well beyond any analyst sitting in a Washington office.

First, any new development would surely be in Teheran. I would have made that bet even without information from Pierce. There are universities in Tabriz and Mashad and Isfahan, but they were weak in science even before the ayatollahs took over. Now, as a high-level Iranian who had fled the country just four days before the Shah (and been forced to bribe his way out) said to me, "The technical programs are being run by Ph.D.'s in theology from the University of Qom."

So it was Teheran if it was anywhere. Roland Pierce had come to the same conclusion, but at that point his analysis had taken him in the wrong direction. He knew that the United States had spent billions of dollars on fusion research. As a long-time federal employee, he assumed that the only group with enough money and talent to do the work in Iran must be part of their government.

"If you can provide us with exact coordinates," he had said just before I left, "we'll make a quick strike and pick up the team members and as much equipment as we can. This could be another Peenemunde."

At the end of the Second World War, the Americans and Soviets had between them scooped up the whole German rocket team from Peenemunde and laid the foundation for both nations' space programs. Pierce did not say, and I did not ask, how his strike would be performed. He surely had his people in place in Teheran, but what I did not know I could not tell.

Pierce's Peenemunde analogy sounded impressive, and I have no doubt that it went down well in briefings to his bosses. But I disagreed with him for two reasons. First, the government ministries here, even in the old days of near-unlimited oil wealth, had not employed first-rate creative talent. But second, and more important, I knew that Iran had never engaged in research into magnetic confinement and tokamaks. They had no "big fusion" projects. If a path to commercial fusion power had been discovered

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here, it must be along some new and untraveled road and employ a new physical insight.

To me, that did not suggest large teams and massive equipment. It suggested pencil and paper, and the lonely inside of one person's head.

I could imagine Roland Pierce's skeptical reaction. "The Iranian school system today is terrible for science training. Are you suggesting that some half-educated unknown is behind this?"

He was not here for me to remind him that Newton, an unknown isolated from all scientific colleagues by the Great Plague of 1664-5, had in those years laid down the physical laws that created modern science; that Einstein, a half-educated unknown hidden away in the Swiss Patent Office in Berne, had produced the papers on relativity and quantum effects that led to today's world; that Ramanujan, a self-taught unknown isolated in Madras, had devised formulas that staggered the best mathematicians of Europe when they saw them.

Teheran University, isolated for years from the rest of the scientific world, was just a couple of miles from my hotel.

I put on older and shabbier clothes and went outside again. I walked north. Yesterday's dusting of snow had disappeared, and a warmer breeze was at my back. I could taste spring in the air.

The fine weather brought many people out of doors. When I came to the campus the walkways were busy with students and faculty, walking and talking. The days of riots and armed guards were a distant memory. No one took any notice of me as I moved from building to building, reading the signs. That was it: *tabiyat*—natural sciences; somewhere in there would be the physics department.

I went in and wandered around, wondering what I expected to see. If my logic were valid, I should see nothing special. Men and women would be teaching and taking classes, or quietly working in their rooms. Perhaps the oddest thing about geniuses is how ordinary they look.

I made my way to the office of the secretary, an older man carefully dressed in a shiny suit and a shirt frayed at the collar. If anyone respected the old traditions, he was a prime candidate. But you have to be very careful in these things. It does not do to offend someone who is proud of his professionalism.

"I am looking for a friend of a friend," I said. "His name is Dr. Manoucher." The banknote I was holding, twice what I had given the desk clerk at Victoria's apartment building, was discreetly tucked away in my fist so that only the end showed.

He looked at it, looked away at the wall, looked back at my hand. And nodded. I moved my hand forward.

As he turned his eyes again to the wall, I dropped the note onto an open book in front of him. He closed it—still without looking. He must have had a lot of practice.

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"I don't know any Dr. Manoucher," he said. "He is not in this department."

"I am not sure that he is even at this university. This is the department of physics?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is possible that he is at Shiraz. I was given other names at this university, who also know Dr. Manoucher, but I do not remember them. Perhaps if you had a directory, to refresh my memory . . ."

He shook his head, but before I could feel disappointed, he pointed to the wall behind me. "No printed directory," he said, "but everyone in the department is shown there."

It was a huge blackboard, with dozens of names neatly written on the right in green chalk. To the left were days and times and room numbers, what I assumed to be class schedules.

"May I?"

He waved his hand. "Certainly."

I stepped closer to it and carefully read down the list. Five of the faculty showed blank schedules. I pointed to the first. "He is not here?"

"No. Mr. Ashrafi is away in Baluchistan, on a two-month trip."

"The others also?"

"No. They are taking time off for private activities, but I do not know where they are. They did not leave a forwarding address."

"If I may." I took out a pad and wrote down the five names. I did it in English. When in Rome . . . don't write your private notes in Italian. "That is the most likely man." I pointed at a different name, fourth from the bottom.

"Dr. Azimi. His class will end in five minutes."

"Thank you. I will speak with him." Before he could offer to show me the man's office, I dropped another note on his desk and walked to the door.

"You have been most helpful."

I left while he was busy tucking away the money. I am sure that so far as he was concerned we had just conducted business on traditional, satisfactory, and fully honorable lines. In the East there is a huge difference between bribery and corruption.

I walked through the building again on every floor, confirming my first impression. There were lecture rooms and private rooms, but there was no experimental equipment. Roland Pierce had been quite specific: a *working* fusion reactor.

It could not be built here, even if it were small and simple. I examined my list of names. Anyone who worked night and day to build a new reactor would work, eat, and live at that site. They would need time away from the university, and money for equipment. At this point government resources might enter.

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Before I left I dropped in on Dr. Azimi and confirmed that he did not know the fictitious Dr. Manoucher. I did not want to plant a question mark in the secretary's mind if he ever asked Azimi about me.

In a sense I had gained no new information, but I was operating on the dog-in-the-night principle: that a physicist's absence was significant.

I took my five names to the central records office of the university. They did have a printed directory of faculty members, and permitted me to consult it after I explained that I was trying to find out if Mr. Ashrafi of the Physics Department, now away in Baluchistan, was the same Ashrafi as the one who had studied with me many years ago, at London University.

What I was looking for was simple: I wanted to know the age of the five absent faculty members. The dates of their degrees would give me a good first estimate.

Four of them, including Ashrafi, had foreign graduate degrees obtained in the sixties. The fifth one, Ali Mostafizi, had a bachelor's degree in physics from Teheran University, obtained just three years ago. He was now a teaching assistant.

Scientists, even in their seventies, can do first-rate work. But it is almost always a broadening of trails first blazed in their early twenties. If any of the five was the man I was looking for, it had to be Ali Mostafizi.

And with that conclusion, I came to a dead end. I did not know where to find Ali Mostafizi. Conventional methods did not work. The records office, like the physics department secretary, had no address for him. A call to the telephone company proved useless.

I returned to Fereshte Avenue and again paid my respects to Abdi Radegan—this time with the taxi waiting. He listened carefully, and then he laughed. "In the United States, possibly," he said. "Where there is no true concept of family, a person can disappear. Here, it is impossible. Come and see me tomorrow afternoon at five. I will be surprised if I do not have news. Now you should go and rest. You sound very tired. A tired brain is an inefficient brain."

Abdi, blind, saw more than most sighted people. He was exactly right. Between airplanes and Victoria it was three days since I had enjoyed a full night's sleep.

I returned to the Khedmat, consumed a huge *juje kebab,* and dropped into bed.

A tired brain is an inefficient brain. I had certainly proved it, and I felt like a fool. I knew as well as Abdi Radegan the overwhelming importance of family in Iranian affairs.

Ali Mostafizi might be able to do extraordinary things; but one thing he could not do in Teheran was disappear.

One other thing you cannot do in Teheran is get right down to busi-

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ness. There is an obligatory few minutes of tea and polite greeting, and Abdi insisted that it be observed even though he must have known that I was dying to hear what he had to say.

"Do not miss the importance of this," he said, as a plate of sweet almond cakes was offered to me. "If you are to succeed in Iran, you must think like an *Irani*."

We sat for fifteen minutes, chatting of general world affairs and local politics. I sipped a glass of sweetened tea, nibbled on an almond cake, and commanded myself to be patient. I was feeling a thousand percent more alert. Abdi had been right about my condition yesterday, and he was probably right today.

At last he said, "How can someone, eight thousand miles away, know more than I of what is happening in my home town? Yet this is true. What you told me two days ago was correct. There is a story in the city of a great invention, of a new source of power. The ears tell me of excitement, of a rumored return by Iran to the center of the world stage. My young ears share that excitement."

"But you do not."

"Very good. My son, you are beginning to listen. I do not."

I waited. The old, deeply lined face was brooding, and at last he went on, "The problem with Iran is not the ayatollahs. They were merely the people's reaction to the Shah. But the problem was also not the Shah. It was the world's thirst for oil, and the greedy dreams that brought to us. We used to be a wise and thoughtful people. In the old days, I taught my students the works of our great poets and writers, Hafez and Sa'di and Ferdowsi. Yes, even Omar Khayyam, although he is greater in your translations than in our tongue. In turn the old writers taught us, me as well as my students, about life.

"But what do we learn from oil? Only that it is a source of temporary wealth, which will one day, not far in our future, be exhausted.

"This new source of power that you told me of could help to conserve our oil and restore our civilization—but only if it can be used by the whole world. If it is kept as an Iranian secret, it is far more likely to prove our destruction. I do not wish to see Iran again a pawn on the world scene, with our government made and unmade at the whim of foreign powers. My country has been changed too much already by outside influence."

In his youth, Abdi had been noted as an orator. As he grew older his speeches and comments had become shorter and more compressed. This was one of the longest utterances I had ever heard him make.

I laid my hand on his. "Father, I will do nothing to hurt Iran, or you."

"Do you think I am unaware of that?" He smiled. "Would we be talking together, were it otherwise? Let me go on, now that I am sure we understand each other, to the question that you asked me yesterday. A fourth

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cousin of my brother's wife is a Mostafizi. It is not a common name in this part of the city. Most of the family live in the south beyond the railway station. I will give you their address. Ali Mostafizi is a source of concern to them, because he shows little interest in women—and no interest in business. He spends all his time in his studies, at the university."

"He is not at the university."

Abdi held up his hand. "Patience, my son. He is not at the university at the moment, but spends all his days, according to my brother's wife, at the research unit of the Department of Power. I have an office location there for you—and, should you need it, the address of a single room that he rents in a house off Takht-e-Jamshyd. I am told, however, that he is seldom there."

"Father Abdi, you exceed yourself."

"I have not finished. One of my ears works at the Department of Power. Most of the staff leave there by seven. Most of the entrances are locked, naturally, against pilfering, but the front entrance remains open with a guard."

"I can deal with that."

"I am sure. One admonition, although I know it is unnecessary. There must be no violence."

"There will be none."

"And one warning: Take care."

"I promise. I will take care."

It was almost seven o'clock. I had a tremendous urge to grab the information and rush off at once to the Department of Power. My promise to Abdi held me. Taking care meant taking time. I could certainly spare an extra day.

The knowledge that it was evening, and I could now return to Victoria's apartment, had nothing to do with it.

"How long will you be staying in Teheran?"

Victoria was sitting cross-legged on her bed, wearing the top half of black silk pajamas. She was brushing her hair and looking at me as I lay beside her staring vacantly at the ceiling.

It was a perfectly reasonable question. What it really meant was, we are together after a long absence, and this is very nice. But how long will it last? Two days, or two weeks, or two months? I have other people to deal with, and a life to live.

I had been wrestling with a problem of my own, one still too deeply buried for my brain to formulate in words. I could feel connections forming, but her question interrupted the process and brought me back to earth.

"A few more days," I said.

"You are making progress?" She had heard nothing of a new science

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discovery in Iran, which did not surprise me. As she had pointed out, her interests did not include science even peripherally.

"I think I am making progress," I said. "I will know tomorrow."

I had spoken in English, and she laughed. "Is that an American tomorrow, or one of ours?"

The Iranian word, *farda,* carries with it the same feeling of indefinite extension as the Spanish *mañana.*

"I ask for a reason," she went on. "I must make a business trip to France, and I would like to leave in the next day or two. I was thinking, when you conclude your work here we might spend a few days in Paris together. But we would need to plan times and places now."

It was a great prospect, but a lot depended on just *how* my work was concluded. If Roland Pierce made a strike at my suggestion, I did not want to be in Iran one minute after that.

"Let's make plans," I said. "I'll get there, one way or another, and I'll call to tell you when. Paris sounds wonderful."

We went on to talk of restaurants and museums, where we would stay, what we would do. Victoria stretched out on the counterpane, a presence to push any other thoughts to one side.

But long after midnight those thoughts returned to trouble me, and in the silent hours before dawn I made a decision. I would go to the Department of Power. Not secretly, as Abdi had suggested, at night after the regular staff had left; I would go openly, during the regular hours of business.

And I would test the soundness of my instincts.

During the time of the Shah's rule, the Department of Power had been known as the Ministry of Power. The Minister did not so much hold meetings as grant audiences. Foreign businessmen, moguls in their home offices, had groveled and fawned along with their local partners to win big construction contracts.

Approaching that same white-walled building, I wondered who occupied that huge seventh floor office today. Did he share those same delusions of grandeur?

Probably. The city had descended a long way from the glory days of the Peacock Throne, but human nature does not change.

I was relying on that. When I walked confidently into the building foyer and headed for the elevators, the two men behind the desk on the left glanced up only briefly. My clothes said prosperity, my attitude suggested that I had every right to be there and knew exactly where I was going.

The room that Abdi had told me how to find was long, wide, and apparently deserted. At its center stood a ten-foot cylindrical pipe that ran through the center of a torus no more than two feet across. One end of the pipe stood in a big tank of water that bubbled with steam. The other end

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was flat and polished, and was marked FUSION REACTOR MODEL TWO-A.

I walked to the end of the room. Beyond it lay a separate chamber, complete with cot, table, chair, and a small lamp. It too was empty, but there were signs of recent habitation. The cot was neatly made up, and textbooks in English and Farsi stood open on the table.

All I had to do was walk back to my hotel, take out the little tape recorder from my case, and record a message. The machine had a dual function. At the appropriate time, when it was optimal for one of the orbiting ferret satellites, the signal would be encoded and transmitted. Roland Pierce would have it within the hour.

And then?

And then the strike force would arrive to pick up the miniature fusion reactor, together with its inventor, Ali Mostafizi.

But if I was right, the reactor would be a fake. And Ali Mostafizi would not be Ali Mostafizi.

And the strike force, including most or all of Pierce's Teheran contacts, would be scooped up by Iran security.

You see one layer, but there is another beneath.

I had done a little good work at Teheran University, but after that everything had been far too easy. Names, places, entry points, suggested times to act—they had been dropped into my lap with no effort on my part. Had I come at night, as recommended, I felt sure that I would have seen "Ali Mostafizi" at work on the reactor. Now I looked at it more closely, that "fusion reactor" seemed about as real as if it were made of cardboard.

I did not blame Abdi Radegan. He was perhaps the wisest man I knew, but he was old, and blind, and dependent entirely on his ears. It was not his fault that his ears now had their own agenda.

I went straight to my hotel and packed my bag. The intelligent thing to do was to head at once to Mehrabad Airport and take the first plane out of Iran. I made my reservation, for a flight that left for Rome at nine P.M. I called Victoria's apartment building, and left word that I would see her in Paris.

And then I paused. What stopped me were Abdi's own words: "If you are to succeed in Iran, you must think like an *Irani*." When I tried to do that, the whole set-up did not feel right. The Iranian mind can be infinitely devious, but it has its own patterns of thought. When I tried to think that way, the idea of a fake fusion reactor to trap the agents of a foreign government was *wrong*. It had an alien feel and an alien flavor.

I left the hotel and began to walk south toward the railway station. I wondered about the seed from which the installation that I had just seen might grow in an Iranian mind.

To protect a secret, place it among a million falsehoods.

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I realized that my instincts were taking me in the right direction, but I would be too conspicuous in business clothing. I returned to the hotel, changed into the shabbier outfit that I had worn to the university, and hailed a cab to take me south.

As I had expected, the neighborhoods became poorer the farther we went. Few foreigners ever penetrated beyond the railway station, though I had been taken there by Abdi to one of the strangest dinners of my life, at a restaurant deep underground in an abandoned water cistern that had once served the southern part of the city. No alcohol was served, but the *gualian* water-pipes were everywhere, and the air was blue with the smoke of opium on the beds of hot charcoal.

At Abdi's insistence, I had tried it. Before you can think like an *Irani* you must first behave like one.

Even though a cold, thin rain had started to fall, I asked the taxi driver to drop me one kilometer short of my final destination. I went the rest of the way on foot. It was not the poorest part of the city, which I had been half expecting. The buildings were three and four story walk-ups of brown brick. I suspect that the area normally bustled with life, but the rain and a chilly wind were keeping most people indoors.

Absentee landlords are rare in Iran. As in most houses, the landlord occupied the ground floor apartment. He was standing in his doorway and stared at me suspiciously when I entered the building, until I said, "Is Ali Mostafizi in?" Then his suspicion changed to a gloomy resignation.

"Ali is always in," he said. "His mother says she can't get him out of his room."

He nodded toward the bare wooden stairs, and I went on up to the fourth and top floor, past cooking smells that brought back a hundred memories.

A woman, overweight and in her mid-forties, opened the door. I assumed it was his mother, and she showed more pleasure than surprise when I asked to see Ali. "It's about time he had some company," she said. "Are you from the University, or the Department?"

"Neither," I said. "I'm interested in Ali's scientific work."

"Well, maybe you can get him to take a break and go out somewhere." She gestured to a door that was cracked open just a few inches. "I know I can't."

The room I went into was small and crowded. A single bed ran along the left-hand side, and beyond it sat a little table and chair in front of the window. Behind the chair notebooks were piled untidily on the floor, and next to them was a square wooden box filled with books and papers.

Seated in the chair in profile to me was a dark-haired young man who turned his head slowly as I entered. I looked at him with interest and, if I am honest, a good deal of disappointment. My imagination had built its own picture of what he ought to look like if he was what I thought he

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might be. He didn't match up. He was thin-faced, with a big nose beneath which sat a thin apology for a mustache. His hair needed cutting and straggled down over his watery brown eyes. He brushed the lank locks away with a bony ink-stained hand, and showed no signs of speaking.

A genius can look ordinary, but surely not *that* ordinary.

"I would like to discuss with you your scientific work," I said. Already I sensed that conventional introductions would not take me far. "Is there somewhere we might go where I could buy you tea or coffee?"

"We can talk here," he said, and waved his hand to a second chair with a frayed back and a seat piled with books.

Well, I could tell his mother that I had tried. I moved the books, and saw that although several were in Farsi most were printed in English.

"Do you speak English?" I said, in that language.

"A little bit. Not very good. But I read it good."

He spoke slowly and awkwardly. I nodded, and switched back to Farsi. I explained that I was merely a visitor to Teheran, but one who had heard that he was doing important original work in physics. I had a science background myself. Would he be willing to describe his work to me?

He nodded, and for the first time his eyes showed excitement. He began to speak, in the odd language mix that I had encountered many times in meetings with Iranian scientists. Technical words that do not exist in Farsi are not translated; the English terms are simply imported wholesale, and used where needed.

Within ten minutes I knew that what Ali Mostafizi was saying was quite beyond me. He spoke comfortably of his extensions of superstring theory, and emphasized how his work used broken symmetries as they had never been used before in physics. To illustrate his points he pulled a sheet of paper to where we could both see it, and scribbled on it incomprehensible diagrams and relationships. A mousy, diffident young man in casual pants and a rumpled striped shirt was transformed to an assured and confident authority.

He could be spouting absolute nonsense—no one is as self-assured as a crank. Maybe that's what his associates at Teheran University had thought. I certainly found it hard to believe that they could have had much idea what he was talking about.

He shrugged when I asked him.

"There is no one," he said simply. "No one who understands."

"You have published abroad?"

He shook his head, and shyly lifted from a stack three thick notebooks. "I have done a writing-out, very carefully, from my original notes. It is all here, in these books. But to publish . . ."

He shrugged. I opened the first notebook, and saw the problem. He had written out his ideas indeed—Farsi text, written as usual from right to left, densely interspersed with unfamiliar equations and formulae writ-

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ten Western-style from left to right. Occasional unintelligible diagrams and the scattered English technical terms did nothing to help. It was a combination likely to baffle anyone on earth.

"But people believe in your work," I said. "Here in Teheran, it is becoming famous."

"Not my *real* work." He shrugged. "No one would listen, as you are listening. The university asked always for a *practical demonstration,* a proof that what I am doing can be useful. I give them one, a trivial application, and they act as though it is far more important than the theory itself."

A trivial application. I caught my breath, and at last said, "The application—it is a working nuclear fusion reactor?"

"You saw it? I thought it was not being shown to anyone. I was told to work here at home, and not to talk. But since you know already . . . There is of course nothing new about nuclear fusion." His voice was casual. "My design is compact, though, and cheap, and it provides net energy production at room temperatures."

"It could transform the world."

"Do you think so? Surely not." He shrugged that idea away, and added, "I do not want to see my world transformed. My mother says that Iran has been transformed too much already in her lifetime. I agree, even within *my* lifetime. Too much change."

He and his mother had probably never met Abdi Radegan, but they spoke like two of his disciples.

I sat back in my chair and looked at him. In half an hour I had gone from total skeptic to total believer. Weedy mustache and all, the man before me was a true genius. His value was incalculable.

In less than an hour I could be back at my hotel. The signal could go to Roland Pierce for a strike early tomorrow morning, after I was safely on the way to Rome. Ali Mostafizi and the secret of cheap commercial fusion would be in Washington within three days.

And then?

Then fusion power would be an American secret as well as an Iranian one. Both countries would feel international pressure to share that secret, and both would try to keep it hidden. There would also be American interest in other "trivial applications." Ali Mostafizi would still work in hiding, this time for a different and an alien country.

I thought again of Ramanujan, isolated and self-taught, doing his profoundly original work in mathematics. But that is not the end of the Ramanujan story. After his talent was known, he was brought in 1914 from India to Cambridge, England. Five years of prodigious mathematical collaboration followed, but in those years Ramanujan was lonely, heartsick, homesick, and in physical decline. He returned at last to India and died there in 1920, at the age of thirty-two.

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"I know people who will take you seriously," I said. "I can make sure that your work is translated for them to read. But I cannot do that here, in Iran."

I tapped the three notebooks. "You say that these were created from your original notes. Do you still have all those notes?"

"Of course." He gestured to the mess on the floor, as though he never dreamed of throwing anything away.

"Then might I take these with me? I promise that I will treat them with great care, and make sure that scientists pay attention to what is in them."

He stood up. "Of course you can take them. I would be . . . be . . ." He shook his head. "What can I possibly do to repay you for this?"

"You can do two things. Tomorrow I would like you to pay a visit to an old friend of mine, Abdi Radegan, up north on Fereshte Avenue. I know that you and he will find much to talk about."

I picked up the notebooks and stood up. While he watched in confusion I placed money on the table in front of him. "My other request is more immediate," I said. "Astonish your mother. Take her out for dinner this evening."

I arrived in Rome in the middle of the night, and spent much of the next day there before continuing to Paris. From the world's point of view that is where the important part of the story ends; but from my perspective there is a significant bit left.

Once in Paris I went to the agreed-upon hotel and found that Victoria had already checked in. We spent a delightful evening wandering around old haunts on the Left Bank, and dropped into bed slightly tipsy a little before midnight.

I woke an undefined number of hours later, with the covers pulled off me, a bright light shining in my eyes and a voice saying, "I'm sorry to wake you, but we are in rather a hurry."

"What the hell is this?" I rolled off the bed and stood up. It's a bit difficult to act dignified when you are stark naked, but I grabbed the sheet and wrapped it round me like a cut-price schoolboy version of Julius Caesar. "What do you want?"

There were four of them, but apparently only one spokesman. "Let us begin with Ali Mostafizi's notebooks," he said. "The ones you took with you from his home."

"Ah. Well, it's a bit difficult to give you those. I can tell you where they are, though."

He made a little gesture, and two of the men moved to grab me, one by each arm. "Where are they?"

"They are in Rome. To be specific, one is with the American Embassy, one is with the British Embassy, and the third is with the French Em-

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bassy." And, when he frowned at me in perplexity, "It may take me a while to persuade you of this, but I acted in the best interests of everybody—including Iran."

"*Tokhmir!* You did not act for Iran. You did it because—because—" But he ran out of steam or ideas. "You will not need to persuade me. You will need to persuade an Iranian court. When and if you can."

I could guess what was coming, but I don't have the physique or the skill to fight four men. I'd also rather wake up after an injection than after a bang on the head. The dose is more reliably calibrated.

So far Victoria had said not a word. She had lain there wide-eyed, with a blanket pulled up to her chin. Now as the needle slid into my left arm she stood up and came naked to my side.

"You do not know what it was like, Christopher, after the Shah left." She was staring at me, pleading if not in words. "For people like me, people who had worked with Americans, it was very difficult. If we wanted to live, we had to do—what we had to do."

I would like to think that I nodded and smiled at her before I passed out, and said "We all do what we have to do." But I doubt it. I think I just dropped my sheet and keeled right over.

Now it isn't up to me at all. Inside an Iranian jail you do not have much say in things.

I gather, though, that things are more complicated than I expected, and that may work to my advantage. I had expected to tell my story, be believed or disbelieved, and in either case be promptly executed.

But it hasn't happened, and if Victoria is right it may not. She was allowed to come and see me (although, regrettably, the concept of conjugal visits has not yet reached Iran). Apparently an international brouhaha is now going on of major proportions. Ali's notebooks have been translated, one in each country, and top scientists have been given access to them. They have asserted, with a single voice, that the work is of paramount scientific importance and they must see the other two notebooks.

Iran, of course, demanded all the notebooks back. But being a remarkably experienced and realistic people when it comes to negotiation, they know they don't have a chance in hell of getting even one notebook. They also know that in the long run, and maybe even in the short run, Iran will benefit if it is not tied to the seesaw of world oil supply and demand. And they still hold the trump card: Ali Mostafizi, who has no interest in leaving the country even if they would let him.

So they are making their own convoluted counter-offer. They will not insist that the notebooks be returned. Instead, a select group of foreign scientists, approved by Ali Mostafizi, will be welcome to visit Iran. However, there will be conditions. There must be emphasis on application of the new ideas, as well as on new theories, and by international agree-

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ment the center for the development of those applications will be in Iran—with in-country investment funding provided by the foreign partners.

It's the type of deal that Iranians love to make, one where the other countries can be played off against each other and the real negotiations take place *after* the agreements are all signed. However, it doesn't sound like a bad idea all round.

Especially for me. According to Victoria, Ali Mostafizi, probably with subtle guidance from Abdi Radegan, has laid down a condition of his own. His main interface with foreign visiting scientists must be Christopher Dutton, a man he trusts and the first one to recognize the importance of his work.

It's not true, of course. All I really did was decide that I was not competent to evaluate what he had done.

I'm not going to start an argument, though. As I said before, everyone must die sooner or later. I still have a strong preference for later. ●

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Carla Graubard
President and Publisher

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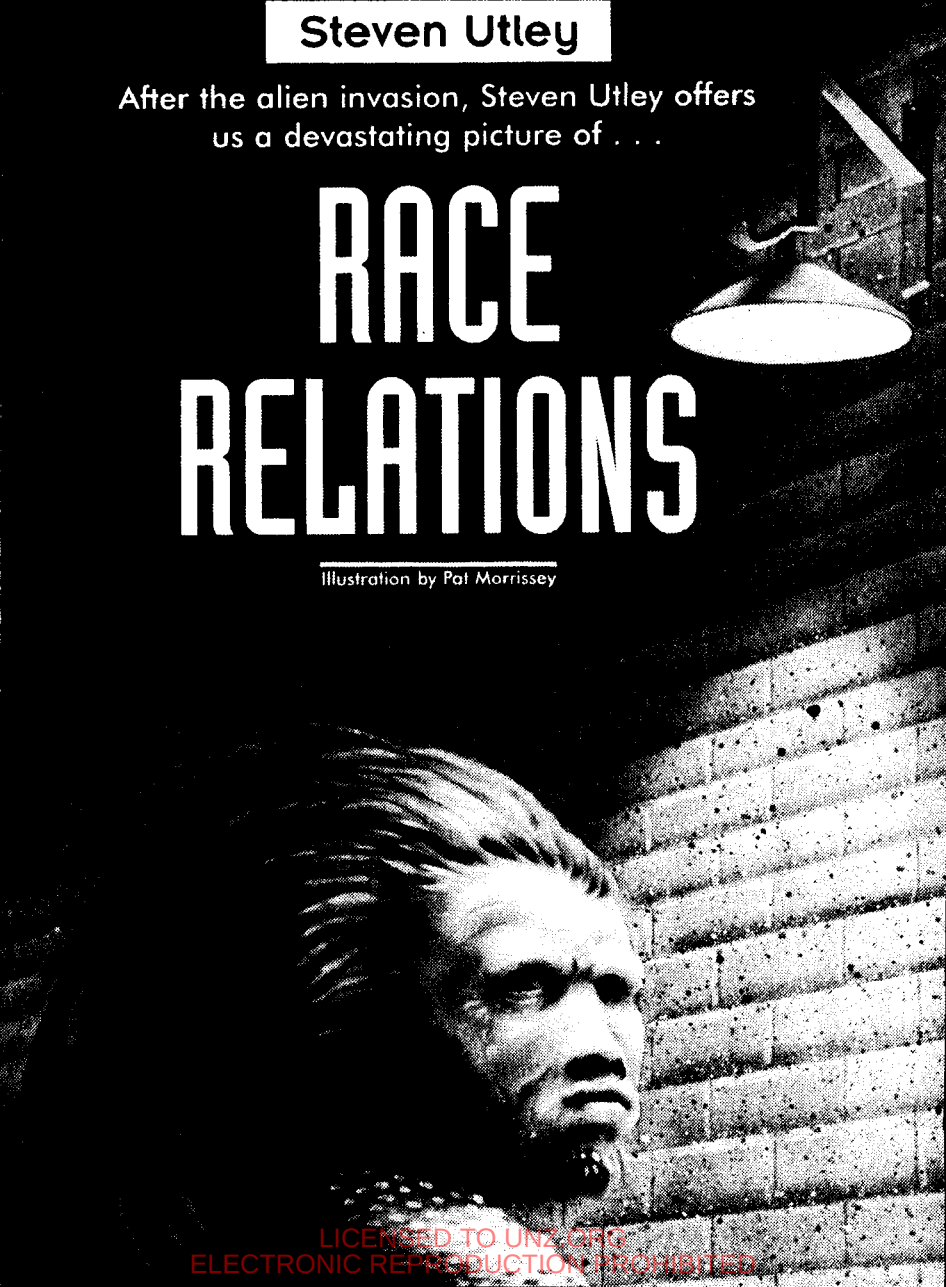
Steven Utley

After the alien invasion, Steven Utley offers us a devastating picture of . . .

RACE RELATIONS

Illustration by Pat Morrissey



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As we approached the downtown bridge, I saw the glow of flames reflected on low clouds to the east. "What's going on?"

The cab driver shrugged and continued to avoid looking at me in the rearview mirror. Bad enough that I was his fare, that I was probably shredding his upholstery; worse if he had to talk to me.

I said, "It looks like the whole east side of town's on fire," and after ten seconds or so the cab driver—suddenly curious, perhaps, about my tipping habits—managed a reply.

"It's rioting. It's on the television."

"I don't have television. Who's rioting?"

Another shrug. "Those people on the east side."

I thought I recognized his accent. "Are you Jamaican?"

His grip tightened on the steering wheel. "American."

"Me, too."

"Like hell," he muttered under his breath. He either didn't know or didn't care that my hearing was enhanced. He had proved his point, anyway. "Like hell" was as American as you got.

I let him be and read graffiti on the buildings we passed. You could tell who lived in which neighborhood by what was scrawled on the buildings that bounded it, DEATH TO GOOKS or SPICS OUT OF U.S. or KILL ALL NIGERS (*sic*), liberally seasoned, of course, with swastikas, death's heads, the f-word; and the occasional incongruous heart. My own apartment building on the edge of Kiwi Town, adjoining a poor white neighborhood, was decorated with all the standard threats and insults. For the benefit of casual passersby, we targets of this hostility were helpfully identified by a host of innocuous-seeming terms, gropings toward the one succinct enough, emphatic enough, to put my kind in its place: cockleburr, eggboy, coconut, hairy turd, beachball, porcupine, pangolin, kiwi. At least my kind had brought out educated bigots. I had to love pangolin.

"Here you go," the cab driver said as we pulled up in front of the Blue Grotto. I handed him money over the seat back, and he took it without turning more than was necessary for him to watch out for my quills. Then I stepped into a humid evening full of sirens and tinged with a faint, not-unpleasant smell of burning. There was little traffic, no one on the sidewalk, few parked cars. The Blue Grotto was dark and cool and elegant, and the hostess was very good, a credit to hostesses everywhere. Had I blinked, I would have missed the flicker of revulsion, the moment of calculation as she wondered how best to shoo away the thing on her doorstep. Nothing so rude as "Go away, you awful monster." More likely, "We require all of our guests to wear a shirt and jacket, and that poncho simply does not qualify"; she could hold out like Horatio at the bridge till I tired of explaining why I can't wear sleeved garments and moved on.

"Miz Barbara Stone," I said quickly, "is expecting me."

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"Of course." The situation was under control: I was only a movie actress's exotic date; everyone knew how eccentric movie actresses were. "Please come this way."

There were half a dozen people scattered among the tables. Every one of them gave me a startled look. A man at the back of the room swore just loudly enough for his companion and me to hear. The hostess led me through the room, and I would have kept walking, blundered right into her when she paused and pivoted, if an extraordinarily beautiful Asian woman at a nearby table hadn't called me by name.

It was my turn to be startled. I said, without conviction, "Barbara?"

"Yes. It's me. Really." She looked as Asian as anybody except a real Asian can look. She had always been small, which helped, but now her hair, originally wavy sandy blonde, was straight and as black as a raven's butt. Cosmetic surgery had created delicate folds at the inner corners of her eyes and reduced the dimensions of her nose. Chemicals had changed her complexion. The hostess smiled professionally, shot Barbara a look that meant, Never bring a pet in here again, and whisked away. I sat down heavily and tried to locate something of Barbara's old face in her new one. She had always had different faces—her movie-role faces, all of them simulating intimacy and inviting adoration, no two alike save in that they made drunkards give up the bottle, made teetotalers long for a belt, made one pathetic lunatic kill total strangers and himself. She had had her unmade-up, at-home, in-bed, in-love face, too, the one I had liked so much, the one that could make me forget to breathe. She may have been an ambitious, self-absorbed little beauty, but she had been *my* ambitious, self-absorbed little beauty.

The operative phrase here was *had been*.

"My God," I managed to gasp out. "I didn't recognize you."

Barbara made a bright smile and spoke my name again. "No one in the States recognizes me any more. I'm a has-been here. A never-was."

"You—no. You were never a never-was."

"Mm, maybe not. But I am a mega-star all around the Pacific rim now. Oh, it is good to see you."

She sounded sincere, but, then, she was an actress. My heart, which had been hurting ever since I got the call to meet her, started to break. Nevertheless, I put on a smile of my own, probably not a very good one, and said, "You're as lovely as ever. Completely different, but lovely." To spare her having to remark on my own appearance, I added, "when did you decide to become an Asian?"

"Five years ago." Her smile suddenly became a real smile, not the one I remembered, but, still, a real one. Of course. I had directed conversation away from obvious but difficult topics to the subject always dearest to her: her career. "I was rocketing away in the new entertainment capital of the world, when I suddenly bumped my head on a glass ceiling.

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Things'd reached a point where it was no longer enough for me to be Japanese-speaking and white. I had a choice. I could come back to the States, go down with Hollywood, grub through teevee, dinner theater. Or I could become Japanese-*looking* and be a mega-star overseas."

"You could've looked Japanese with computers."

"That would've been dishonest." Her tone was gently chiding. "I had to become Japanese for real." I would have laughed but for the next thing she said. "I have a Japanese name now, and a Japanese husband."

I couldn't have articulated, even to myself, what I felt at that moment. Whatever it was evidently showed in my face, though, because she looked slightly chagrined and said, "It was a good career move."

"I guess. Well. Are there Japanese kids, too?"

"No. Mister Hara likes my figure the way it is. Anyway, when I heard you'd been found in New Mexico or somewhere, I flew in and called and, well, here I am." She indicated her remade self with an exquisite hand. "This must be very strange for you."

"Everything's strange for me. As for this, I guess it isn't any stranger for a girl from Baton Rouge to play at being Japanese than it ever was for Tokyo businessmen to play at being Texas cowboys. Anyway, the major stuff's easy. Demographic shifts, breakdown of society, people living on the moon, going to Mars. It's the little, personal things that're hard. One minute, I'm twenty-nine years old and have a career and—" I stopped myself from saying *and you*. "The next thing I know, I'm pushing forty-five and don't have anything, and people are telling me I've been possessed for fifteen years by invisible creatures from outer space. Thanks for standing by me, hon."

She looked as though I had slapped her. It took her a moment to make her lower lip stop trembling. "I honestly didn't know. You just left, got up in the middle of the night and left. I didn't know, nobody knew those things were coming and taking over people's bodies. I know you must have a lot of catching up to do. We had something nice, and I was sick with worry about you. But I finally had to get on with my life."

"I got cheated out of my life. Fifteen years of it. Maybe if we'd both been possessed. . . ." Her eyes got as round as they could get. "Forget I said that. It's a horrible thing to wish on somebody."

"Was it, did it—"

"I have no memories of it. None at all."

"Oh."

"I've run into two or three of our old friends. We don't see one another, I just run into them. I'm like some young animal that wandered away from the nest and came back smelling funny. None of my litter-mates really wants to have anything to do with me. But they do sort of try to bring me up to date. I hear about Bill and Sally's two sons, or Bruce and Nancy's daughter, and commit the information to memory like a kid learning

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the multiplication tables. Eventually, I'll be able to pretend I have something to show for the past fifteen years."

"If there's anything I can do," she said quietly, "to help you catch up, or if you need money—don't be offended. I know the government stipend isn't much. I have more money than I'll ever be able to spend."

I shook my head. "I have enough." Enough for a small room in Kiwi Town and all the spoiled fruit I could eat. I began to strangle on a sob and willed my eyes not to water. Maybe she really had loved me, as crazy as it seemed at the time, but now she was capable only of remembering that she had, whereas I had gone from then to now in a blink. I wanted, and didn't dare, to take her hand. She'll be repulsed, I warned myself. She'll get quills stuck in her. I godhelpme was still in love with whatever remained of her inside her alien form. It was a relief to notice the hostess moving among the tables. "Barbara," I said, "she's telling everybody the place is closing early. The riot's out of control, spreading. There's no danger here, of course, but a curfew's been announced. You and I had better leave and go lock ourselves indoors."

"We'll finish this conversation another time."

"Yes." I felt a sudden great tenderness for her. It was over between us, she was running a decade and a half ahead of me, had mutated into a stranger I would never get the chance to know, but she had come all this way to see me. She must have, I decided, truly loved me, once upon a time. We rose. "See you around, Barb," I said. "Missis Hara." She spoke my name again, this time as though Mozart had composed it.

Then we went our separate ways, forever.

After several tries, I caught a cab back to Kiwi Town and had myself deposited in front of its one bar. Almost the first thing I had done to mark my alleged return to normal life was to pay a visit to my old neighborhood bar. A neighborhood bar, I reasoned, ideally existed out of time, unchanging, comfortingly static. It turned out to be not such a terrific idea: nobody who hadn't been possessed wanted to drink with anybody who had.

Kiwi Town's bar had no name, no music, and only three bristly customers sitting on stools. There was a television set mounted high in a corner. The sound was turned down; the image on the screen was an aerial view of burning buildings and streets filled with running, falling, crawling human figures. No one paid any attention. Two of my fellow pangolins argued at one end of the bar, and the third sat at the other end, staring at nothing I could see and absently stroking his chin quills. The bartender poured me a drink. I let it sit, watched the ice melt, and eavesdropped on the argument, which had to do with whether or not male and female pangolin people would breed true.

"Who do you know," the taller one demanded, "who has sex any more?

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You even have a sex drive, Jimmy? I sure don't. I don't even miss it until you remind me to think about it. You only think about it because sex is all you ever thought about, back when. So. No sex drive? No breeding. Besides, all the aliens did was enlarge certain glands and organs. Genetically, we're still just human beings."

"Tom, we're not still human *anything!*"

"Listen to me, Jimmy. Acquired traits can't be passed on."

"You're telling me if I got some girl pregnant right now, the baby'd be a normal human baby?" Jimmy slid off his stool and held his arms away from his torso. "Look at me." His voice was plaintive. "*Look* at me, for crissake!"

Tom looked, and so did I, though there was nothing there I didn't see in my mirror every day: a robust, egg-shaped body covered with stiff, spiky hair.

Jimmy noticed me and climbed back onto his stool. "We should've made 'em change us back before they left."

"Nobody could make them do anything," said the man at the opposite end of the bar. He nodded a hello to me. "Haven't seen you in here before."

"I'm—it's only been a couple of weeks since I came to. In the middle of nowhere. Arizona."

"My name's Graham. Call me Al. That's Tom and Jimmy at the far end there, and Dick's the gent behind the bar. We're all the patrons Dick has so far. He doesn't sell much liquor."

"Don't need to," Dick said, favoring me with a smile. "I'm independently wealthy."

"Nice work if you can get it," said Jimmy.

"It eludes me," Al told Dick, "how your heirs and assigns failed to have you declared non compos mentis while you were possessed."

Dick shrugged. "What can I say? I got relatives who're idiots. I got a lawyer who eats idiots for breakfast."

Al turned back to me. "And you are—"

"Charles."

"Not Charlie or Chuck?"

"Not any more." Not after Barbara. Not ever again.

"Well, Charles, what do you suppose you were doing in Arizona? You and how many others?"

"Seven or eight hundred. I don't know. Soldiers hustled each of us away as fast as we came to."

Al nodded. "Pretty much the same with me, only I came to in Oslo. Sweden!"

"We were constructing things," I said. "Pushing rocks around, piling them up, moving them around. It didn't make any sense."

"Art," said Al. "I think all of us, all around the world, were creating

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their art. Maybe not serious art, though. More like the pictures you draw in the sand at the beach."

Jimmy said, "You're nuts."

"Am I?" Al rolled his apparently untasted drink between his palms. "What do you think all the tens, the hundreds of thousands of us on six continents were up to, then?"

Jimmy only swore, but Tom said, "Why didn't they reveal themselves? That's what I want to know."

Al raised a spiny hand. "They did!"

"You know what I mean. Why didn't they try to communicate with us or something? What were they after?"

"Maybe they were after our women and our methane."

Tom scowled. "The most important event in human history, we get visited by Martians or Venusians or whatever, and nobody even knows it's happened until people like us start wandering off and turning into porcupines. There were alien beings moving us around, working us like puppets, and why?" He looked from Al to me to Dick and back to Al. "For what?"

"For their very alien purposes, I imagine," Al said.

"Well, they should've told us things. A race that can travel invisibly between the stars—no flying saucers, just show up—beings like that must have the answers to a lot of big questions. They might not have remembered war."

"How does that follow?" said Al. "*We* can split atoms. But go outside this neighborhood—" he gestured at the television screen "—and there's utter racial and ethnic Balkanization. Whites hating all non-whites. Blacks, browns, yellows hating all whites. Hating each other, too. The few remaining reds wishing everybody would just go back to Europe, Africa, Asia, and let them have their land back. Under all these stickers I'm a real old fart. I was just a kid back in the days on the civil rights movement, but I was aware enough to pick up on a wonderful idea. The idea was that society would eventually, inevitably become colorblind. That there'd cease to be any hyphenated Americans. We'd all remember where we came from, of course, and take pride in our origins, but we'd all realize who we *were*. Just Americans. Finally, just human beings."

"Oh, brother," Jimmy said.

Tom made an exasperated sound. "I'm not talking about human beings. I'm talking about highly advanced creatures who probably conquered disease—"

"They *were* a disease!"

"—who could've taught us so much!"

"Yeah. Like the Europeans taught the Indians."

"Well," Al said, "the aliens obviously didn't come to communicate or establish interstellar trade routes. And they didn't suffer themselves to be

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studied, quarantined, or killed off, though every government on Earth tried to do each of those things at some point or another." To me, he said, "They deflected violence directed at themselves, you know. I mean, at ourselves. The human race declared war on them, yet they somehow remained at peace with the human race. Lucky for all of us here."

"Lucky, hell!" Jimmy glared the length of the bar. "I had everything before this crap started. Business was great, I had cars, money, women. I had it all. Now I got goddamn quills growing out of me. I give myself the creeps. I live in a goddamn ghetto with two thousand other people who give me the creeps. And all I can eat is goddamn rotten fruit."

"Be grateful," Al said, "they didn't turn you into an insectivore."

"Why don't you stuff a cork in it, old man?"

"Sorry, Jimmy. Even now, I can't speak of aliens and keep an entirely straight face."

I pushed myself away from the bar. Dick cocked an eyebrow and asked gently, "Leaving so soon? You haven't touched your drink."

"Neither has anyone else."

"I don't guess they liked alcohol."

"We come here for the company." Al cast a smile. His gaze settled on the television screen. "I think they were in transit. Going from somewhere to somewhere else. Earth was only a rest stop."

"Well," I said, "they sure messed everything up for me."

"They did that for everybody," Jimmy put in bitterly.

Al said, "I was a geologist. Now I lay tile. You?"

"A voice coach. For movie actors."

"Really?"

"I'm still living off my government stipend and looking for work I can do."

"All the sideshows are full up," said Jimmy. "I know. I checked."

I lurched outside. Several poncho-clad people stood in the street, gazing up at the fringe of sullen red clouds visible above the rooftops. I took two steps, and then Al was suddenly at my side.

He touched my arm lightly and said, "You'll adapt."

"To this? Christ!"

"Look at the bright side. I know, I know—what bright side?" He tapped himself sharply on the chest. "I'm seventy years old, and I feel great. I'm stronger and have more stamina than I did when I was in my twenties. I can hear what people're whispering a hundred yards away. The aliens didn't just modify our bodies, they improved them. Tom was on to one thing back there, the part about conquering disease. We never seem to get sick."

"They stole our lives!"

"True, true. But—listen, I was an oil geologist in Texas when I got possessed. Came to in Sweden, and I don't know how I got there or what I

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may have done getting there. You ever heard of unconformity? Sediments get deposited layer by layer, so you find your Devonian rocks on top of your Silurian on top of your Ordovician. Sometimes, though, you find your Devonian on top of your Ordovician, due to a combination of erosion and a cessation of sedimentation. Unconformity. That's what my lost years are. The aliens took them from me, but they left other things as payment."

I could listen to him no more. I ran to the end of the block. He didn't pursue, only waved when I looked back, and reentered the bar.

I had come in sight of my apartment building on McCarry Street when a car screeched to a stop nearby. I turned toward it to find myself looking into four very young, very angry faces. Two or three fists were shaken at me, and one of the faces called me a walking turd. A machine pistol appeared in one of the fists. "You want some of this?"

I contemplated the hard round muzzle and waited, letting them scream and threaten. I was astonished by my own calm. I wanted to say or do something to defuse their rage, make some gesture that would convey to these beings of another world that I felt no hatred, meant no harm. I could only stand where I was, however, arms at my sides, unsmiling. It wasn't until the faces had withdrawn and the car was speeding away that I felt afraid.

I went inside and sat at my window. I watched the sky burn for hours, and ate brown bananas. ●

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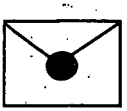

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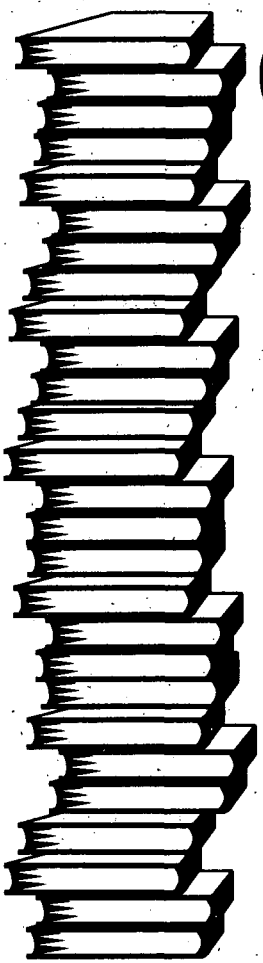

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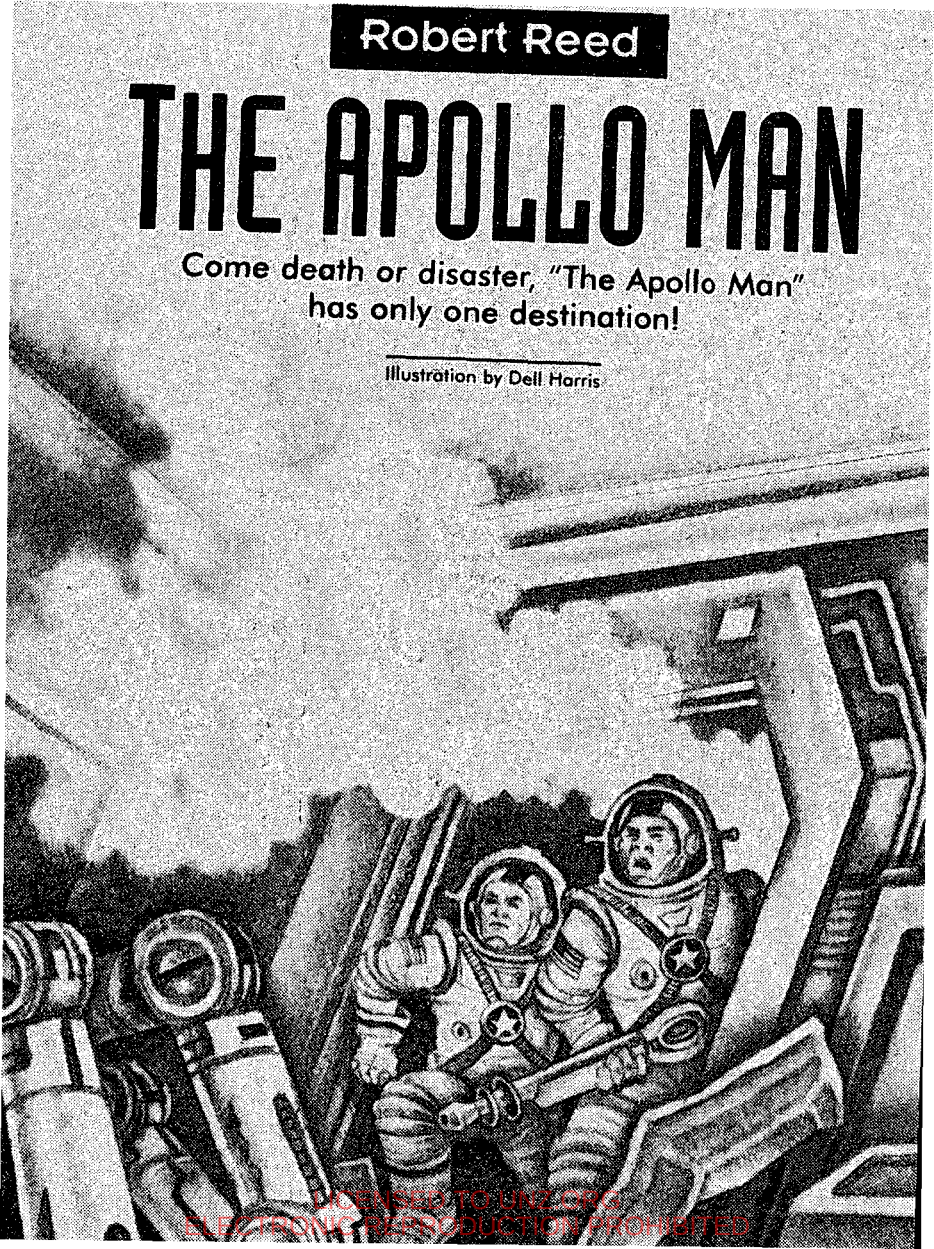
Robert Reed

THE APOLLO MAN

Come death or disaster, "The Apollo Man" has only one destination!

Illustration by Dell Harris



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1

Wes Freeman, remarkable in any century:

Pale green eyes, sun-bleached hair, an aquiline nose. The strong chin and cheeks darkened with a manly stubble. A quarterback's shoulders and long arms, muscle laid on muscle. Then below the ribs—scars. Violent, deep, painful to view. Outraged flesh blends into cold, competent metal. An anodized waist, a titanium carapace. Seven jointed legs are tucked beneath him, the eighth leg gripping the cabin wall, holding him steady.

A naked woman watches him from his bed.

"The thing about Connie is that she was so damned devoted." Wes sighs, continues. "Ninety-two years of marriage, always beautiful, and always waiting for me at home. As if she couldn't do any better, you know? I mean, look at me. Is that kind of devotion reasonable? Does that picture make any sense?"

"I want you," says the woman.

Wes doesn't seem to hear her. "Physically Connie kept changing. With every version of the game, she changed. European mostly, but not always. Differences in the face, in the body. She looked thirty most of the time, but toward the end, when the kids got the chance to build her anyway they wanted . . . Christ. . . !"

"Do you like my body?"

She reminds him of several Connies, but that's not the point.

"Kids wanted her to look fourteen," he complains. "I'd get home from a mission, stinking of cordite and jungle, and there'd she be, waiting at the front door . . . a teenage girl dressed in a negligee or an apron, or nothing, sticking her big new chest out at me."

"Look at my chest." There are only forty-five women onboard. This one comes from a twenty-fifth century romantic-comedy that wasn't particularly romantic or humorous. "Touch me, Wes. Will you, please?"

Not yet, no.

He says, "I killed Reds. That's what I did for a living."

"I know."

"Do you know what a Red was?"

"Not really."

"I don't either." A pause, then he says, "On a good day, I slaughtered fifty million of them. And captured mountains of nukes. Blew up tunnels and fortresses. And torched thousands of miles of green jungle."

"Good for you," she offers.

"I'm designed for fourteen-year-old boys. American, mostly."

"That's a wonderful age."

"I'm a game character." VaRoom VR Systems, 2019. "Boys paid to become me, taking me through VR firefights—"

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"Wes?"

"—and afterward, home to Connie." He remembers their shady street, lush lawns and fancy fat cars in the driveways. One century's vision of another century's ideal. "So the big question is this: Why in hell am I the Mission Commander?"

"Because you're special?"

He stares at her until she lowers her gaze, a hint of fear showing for an instant.

"Twenty thousand astronauts," he says, "and am I the best one?"

"I don't know," she says, trying to laugh. "I've barely slept with a hundred of you, so far."

Slut, he thinks.

Then she says, "But hey! If you're just a game character, then why does it bother you? A stupid hero would just do the job and forget about the rest."

She has a point.

Profound in a glancing, accidental way.

"Come here, Wes. It's your turn to show me things." She smiles and beckons, one arm reaching, the hand on his chest, his scars, then places lower. "How does this thing work?"

Like a zipper, and his member is unscarred and eager. It's an unlikely vigor, considering his ruined legs and lower body. But Wes can't bring himself to complain about that incongruity.

"Closer," she urges.

Jointed limbs unfold, pulling him up to the bed.

"You're doing fine," she coos. "Perfectly fine."

A monitor is fastened to the far wall. It shows the full moon floating against a cold sprinkling of stars. Thirty more hours, and they arrive. A few systems checks, every astronaut at his post, then Wes lands their enormous ship and walks on the lunar surface, reenacting the ancient Apollo missions. That's why they have come here; this is what the Benefactors want.

He hopes.

"Now," the woman groans. "Take me."

Mysteriously, the monitor goes blank.

"Take me, you fucking spider!"

Wes ignores a building sense of guilt, gazing at the pretty face while a part of him—a tiny, useless part—realizes that she's disgusted, and terrified, and is it him?

If so, he wonders, why is she here?

His cabin's hatch explodes, smoke and flame washing over him.

Instincts engage. Wes pulls out of her and turns, slaughtering the first five astronauts sent in after him. With razored limbs, he opens necks and bellies, filling the air with dead men and a weightless mist of blood.

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The attack stalls, for a moment.

Then his lover drives a poisoned blade into his back. "There, you goddamn freak!"

Wes twists, grabs her with human arms and breaks her spine.

And a Neil appears, standing in the shattered hatch, hands praying, inducing one of his potent magic tricks.

A golden fireball surrounds the top astronaut, trying to consume him. Flesh recoils. His metal parts fuse. Furniture and the corpses turn to ash, then shatter into a thick black snow.

Wes cannot move.

Two figures loom over him. A deep voice—not the Neil's—says, "Now kill the bastard."

Floating before him is one of the Nixons. He and the magical Neil are part of Wes's staff, and they're the mutineers, and he feels not the slenderest shred of surprise—

"Kill him!"

—and Wes Freeman falls gratefully back into nonexistence.

2

The Benefactors appear from nowhere, as is their habit. They are gelatinous, resembling jellyfish or some sort of enormous, ornate dessert. Suffused with a blue-white light that casts shadows, they drift in the air, waiting for Wes to heal. Microchines uncook his blood and meat. His heart beats, his head lifts. Speaking with soft, insistent voices, they remind him, "You were reconstituted for a great purpose, Mr. Freeman."

Wes groans, coughs.

"An ignominious turn of events. Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

Chains and metal straps hold his jointed legs to the floor. His arms are tied behind his back, every finger numb. Just like in the old VR game, death is a temporary contingency; some kind of bullshit technology always pulls him from the void. "Ignominious," Wes repeats, then coughs up a ball of black goo. "I suppose you won't help me, will you?"

"Nor will we remind you of the rules," they remind him.

The Benefactors cannot intrude once the mission begins. That's a fundamental no-no, it seems. Yet it doesn't keep them from bitching, their disappointment thick with every word.

"We thought you were the man for the job."

"I never thought so," says Wes, flexing his arms.

"Perhaps that's your problem, Mr. Freeman."

He says nothing.

"Too much introspection, not enough action," is their advice.

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"Action," he repeats.

"What is your plan?"

He lets them wait.

"How do you intend to regain control of your ship?"

"I can't." Isn't it obvious? "I can't move, and someone's taken my reactor off-line. . . !"

They respond with a scornful dose of silence.

"It doesn't matter who lands the boat," he maintains. "Me or a Neil. Even a Nixon. Who cares. . . ?"

They brighten, clicking and popping like old incandescent bulbs.

Wes uses their glow to study his surroundings. He's inside one of the endless storerooms, hundreds of empty spacesuits suspended on thin wires. A small city's worth of astronauts onboard, all created by these damned Benefactors. All are fictional characters from VR games and tri-dee dramas, written novels and interactive hypertainments. Wes is among the oldest, born in the twenty-first century. The youngest come from the forty-eighth century, though they're scarce and barely human.

Each fiction has its common element.

According to their stories, each one of them was part of the original Apollo astronauts. And more to the point, each of them walked on the moon. Over a thousand Neils, two hundred and some odd Buzzes, a few others based on historical models . . . and multitudes of wholly fictional characters, all built from imaginations of fluctuating quality and uneven aim.

Warrior astronauts, and mystics.

Family men, and homosexuals.

Black and brown, yellow and pigment-free souls.

Even a very few women, most born from satires, most of them having no particular interest in males.

Such a bizarre, wondrous crew, and despite his comments to the Benefactors, Wes feels an obligation—a genuine hunger—to win back his ship. He almost admits it now, but when he opens his mouth the Benefactors evaporate, leaving him alone, eyes fighting darkness and the lingering afterimages.

He moans.

Screams.

Wrestles with the bands around his wrists.

Computers inside his carapace find emergency power and awaken, diagnostic programs dealing with his balky reactor. Yet the answer—if there is an answer—won't come just from muscles and machinery. Instincts tell him that, and Wes concentrates, piecing together everything he knows about his enemies.

Arms flexing, still testing the bands.

Just to keep him in character.

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3

A hiss, a bright light. Rectangular, then partly obscured.

Through the opened hatch drift cowardly men. Except for the Neil, who exudes power, walking in a pool of self-made gravity.

The Nixon remains behind his underlings, hidden until the ceiling lights come up. The jowled face glares at Wes, showing contempt and rage and every other harsh emotion.

"Hey, Dick," says Wes. "Keeping busy?"

There are two Nixons onboard. The other one, created for a twenty-seventh century musical, is a charming buffoon. Not this one, unfortunately. He comes from a classic twenty-first century novel. His character committed outrageous crimes, picked a nuclear fight with the Soviet Union, then murdered an astronaut so that he could stand on the moon, watching the Earth demolished by war. The novel was a political diatribe. Its Nixon was an embittered and treacherous cloven-hoofed devil, and Wes regrets the day he let the son-of-a-bitch into his inner circle, thinking he could handle anything that scum could manage.

Says Wes, "Just a word of warning, boys. When I get free, I'm cleaning all of you like a sack of brook trout."

The Nixon grunts and looks at the Neil. "I thought you killed this bastard."

"He doesn't die," the Neil explains. "It's not in his nature."

The other men are disturbed by that assessment. They're mostly lumpy, obedient goons, cannon-fodder from an assortment of political thrillers.

Only the Neil is worth his flesh. He's a thirty-eighth century fiction—a religious entity empowered by God—and with a certain practicality, he says, "I can keep killing him, temporarily. If you want."

The Nixon grins, saying, "Maybe so."

He's no astronaut; that's obvious. Freefall leaves him green and uneasy, a dried bit of vomit clinging to his chin.

"But I'm a good person," says the Nixon. "Tell you what. We'll sign a pact. I'll remain in charge, and you remain down here. Alive, if you want. Dead if you'd rather."

The man is scared.

Maybe it's his character's paranoia, or maybe he's having trouble controlling the crew.

"What's your answer, Wes?"

"I want my old job," he replies. "Give it back, and I'll lock you in this room for the rest of the haul."

The Nixon laughs. "And why should I agree to *that?*"

"Because there's a bomb in the fuel system. If I'm not at the helm when we land, it detonates."

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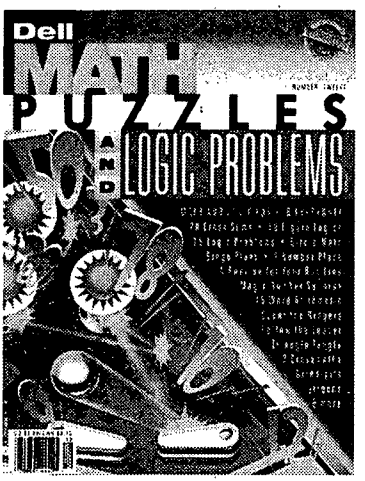

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Laughter swells, the sound of it contrived. Overdone.

The magical Neil steps closer, perfect teeth shining. "A weak lie, and from a cartoon character."

Wes says nothing, does nothing.

"The crew loves me," says the Nixon. "They've been hungry for a strong leader who gives orders. They're tired of lone-wolf assassins."

Wes studies the Neil. He was imagined by a prophet and worshipped by a lunar cult. They believed this deity would be sent by God, helping them rebel against their authoritarian government. But when the rebellion came, no deities showed, and the cult was a footnote before the century's end.

With a careful voice, Wes says, "You're not my first visitors here."

"Yeah? Who else?" The Nixon pushes one of his henchmen, floating closer. "The Benefactors, I suppose."

"They like talking to me." Wes stares at the deity, showing him the truth in his eyes.

"I don't care," the Nixon barks.

"What did they say?" asks the Neil. Interested in a cool, theoretical fashion.

"I don't recall." And Wes smiles, adding, "Just wait and see. Wait and see."

The Nixon seems greener, if that's possible. With a liar's bluster, he claims, "It couldn't matter less. I don't care."

But the Neil thinks otherwise. Turning to his superior, he offers to learn everything worth knowing. "Give me a few hours. Maybe a day, at most. I'll work him into an honest mood."

The Nixon stifles a belch, then says, "Fine."

Then after some graceless freefall acrobatics, the new Mission Commander reaches the hatch, pausing until his henchmen can surround him; and then it's just Wes and the magical Neil, plus the promise of enormous pain.

As both men want it.

4

The astronauts were reconstituted—the Benefactors' word, and worrisome—in a place that might have been Florida, complete with flat ground and the blue Atlantic, plus Florida's sweltering mid-summer weather. Each astronaut was given his own hotel room, historically accurate down to the banalities, and each was left alone to get accustomed to the idea of being alive. The Benefactors seemed patient, but not infinitely patient. They wanted a reenactment of an event that none of the astronauts had actually done, at least in the flesh. Tenaciously vague, they

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described the mission's parameters to each man; and when he heard the goal, Wes asked the obvious question:

"Why not reconstitute the genuine articles?"

The real Neil Armstrong, the official Buzz Aldrin. And the ten other, less noted pilots—

"We don't know those men," was their opaque answer.

"But you know me?"

"Quite well, yes." Their voices were quiet, certain. "You exist as a considerable data base, Mr. Freeman. Among the participants, you're in the upper one percentile. Naturally we've had to extrapolate certain qualities in order to complete you—"

"Where did you find my data base?"

The Benefactors brightened. The stale hotel air grew warmer and even staler. "Data flows into many places, sir. Lost accounts. Derelict ships. Electromagnetic signals. And so on."

"Yeah?"

"We have more than three billion representative games, Mr. Freeman. In terms of life experience, you have much to offer."

He shut his eyes, a multitude of Connies pushing into his thoughts.

"You are a remarkable impossibility, we believe."

With a voice that only sounded brave, he asked, "How long have I been dead?"

The Benefactors wouldn't respond.

He didn't press, asking instead, "What kind of creatures are you?

Silence.

"Are you aliens? Did you evolve from humans?"

The useless air conditioner kicked on with a deep bass thrumming.

Looking across the ocean, Wes asked, "Is this Florida?

"It resembles Florida," they replied.

"But is this Earth?"

"We are very close to the Earth, yes."

Bastards. "I've been here what? Three days?" He pointed toward an imaginary arc in the subtropical sky. "I've never seen the moon. How can we land on it if it's missing?"

"It isn't missing. It's simply changed its orbit." A pause, then they added, "The moon is its own world now. Sir."

Wes refused to feel impressed or awed, yet he couldn't help but remember last night's stars, not one constellation familiar, millennia needed to so thoroughly transform the sky.

After a few sizzling noises, the Benefactors announced, "It is decided. You will serve as Mission Commander and Chief Pilot."

"Excuse me?"

"Training commences at dawn."

"No. No!"

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"Mr. Freeman," they said, their patience growing thin, "you will lead twenty thousand eight hundred and nine astronauts on this vital mission to the moon."

Wes was startled. So startled that his metallic legs began to rattle, and his torso shivered as if chilled.

The bastards said, "You'll serve our needs well."

He didn't care about their needs. Instead he asked, "What do I get for my trouble? Assuming I do what you want—"

Buzzes, electric pops.

Then as the Benefactors faded to nothing, a whispered voice promised, "What is fitting, and what we can offer you. That's what you will receive."

As if that made a shred of sense.

5

Like many deities, the Neil has a real flair for torture.

Wes endures staggering abuse. He is beaten and burned, insulted and electrified, encased in a crystal sphere until he falls unconscious, then is brought back with rivers of icewater. Then finally, tiring of the work, the Neil injects him with toxic levels of truth serum and beats him in a casual fashion, using a flaming club, shouting:

"What did the Benefactors tell you?"

It's the perfect moment. Interrogations flow in both directions; the torturer invests energies, his frustrations steadily rising. Gazing up at the handsome, angelic face, Wes manages one final lie. "They told me, 'Do not worry, Mr. Freeman.' "

Mad eyes flare. "Is that so?"

"They said, 'The Nixon is weak and frightened.' " A pause, Benefactor-style. Then he adds, " 'The Nixon is already plotting his lieutenant's demise.' "

Demise is the perfect word. Authentic, and sharp.

But even better, the Neil is keyed up and vulnerable. Besides, for all Wes knows that is the situation. The paranoid, cunning leader can't be happy with the current arrangement. A magical god-human is helping to support his administration, but only because the Neils, by and large, aren't independent enough to lead their own mutinies. They need God or an old President telling them what to do.

Or a battered old cyborg, maybe.

This Neil makes a low sound, stepping back and throwing his club aside.

"It's funny," Wes observes. "Nixon's up on the bridge, running the ship. And where are you? Inside a storage locker. Kicking the shit out of the one boy who's in no shape to hurt you."

The logic strikes home.

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Making fists, the Neil bangs them together, a bolt of golden lightning leaping across the room.

"Showy," says Wes, "but useless."

A malevolent grin emerges, and his captor says, "Wait here." Wings sprout from his back, golden feathers more gaudy than beautiful; and he flies toward the closed hatch, banging the fists again, metal giving way with a squeal and roar.

Then, silence.

Wes lays motionless for a minute, then moves each of his jointed, spidery legs.

The fusion reactor inside him is a physical impossibility; who cares? Teenage boys accepted him, and the Benefactors built him along those ancient, ignorant guidelines. With heavy hydrogen pulled from his own copious sweat, he has refueled and reignited his internal sun; he energizes a plastic liver inside his carapace, scrubbing the poisons from his blood; then he shatters every chain and strap, freeing himself, feeling as fresh and ready as any time in any life.

The spacesuits are on both sides of him, empty and equal-sized. Helmets are cradled in their arms, name tags sewn onto the chests and augmented with numbers.

Neil 101, he reads.

Neil 102.

Neil 103, and so on. And on. As far as he can see.

6

Every American kid once knew the story of Wes Freeman.

He had commanded Apollo XX—a secret, one-man mission to the moon's far side—and while homeward bound, disaster struck. A Soviet missile struck his capsule as it reentered the atmosphere. Wes was crippled, hovering near death in a secret military hospital. But his superiors had the means to save him, splicing a bizarre machine to his ruined body—a top-secret machine pulled from a crashed UFO, its legs equipped with cutting blades, gatling guns, lasers and flame throwers.

For his ninety-two year existence, it was 1973, or at least some mutated, marginally coherent version of that year.

Ninety-two years of butchering faceless, raceless Reds.

Whatever their reasons, Wes was the sort of man that the Benefactors wanted in charge. The other astronauts—the Neils and Buzzes and so on—were respectful, or they feigned respect out of fear. Even the deified Neil had to wonder which of them could summon the greatest powers. Yet in person, without fail, he was charming without seeming slick, helpful without complaint, and as unruffled as a force of nature.

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Their training consisted of simple controls appearing in each hotel room, instructions inside loose-leaf notebooks, and few functions ever defined.

Only Wes was shown the pilot's controls, and he flew them by instruments and by feel, and usually with success.

The real ship arrived without warning. A creak of metal, and there it was: Enormous. Massive. Crude as a water heater. Within hours, its weight had depressed the Florida coastline, causing widescale flooding. The astronauts were ordered to live onboard, riding elevators up through a skeletal gantry, climbing miles into the cloudless morning sky. Wes made the journey alone. High enough, he could see where the ocean and land came to an end, nothing beyond but space. Everything was a mock-up, it seemed.

"Where's the Earth?" he demanded.

"Beneath you," the Benefactors promised. "It's been compressed into degenerated matter—"

"Like a black hole?"

"Only more sophisticated, and much more useful."

"How long has it been this way?"

"Quite a while, by any count."

Wes sighed, then asked, "Is that why people went extinct? Because their home world collapsed?"

"No, the collapse came much later. By any count."

"Then what killed them?"

A pause. A wavering of blue-white light. "You know why."

Wars. Environmental changes. Bad luck, and dead-end evolution. Wes had talked to several of the youngest crewmen, usually in the hotels' bars. Clues came through their stories. And what was stranger was that their inventors seemingly had forgotten how to build *Homo sapiens,* giving them mechanical hearts that beat beneath plastic ribs. And what was strangest—easily and always strangest—was that not one of those men seemed aware that he was composed of abnormal stuff.

"Are all those answers true?" Wes asked.

"To varying degrees, yes. Yes."

Wes thought for a long while. Then the rocket's final stage came into view, itself larger than any man-made building. That is what would be moonbound, he knew. With solemnity, he observed, "But we're not extinct. We're here, and we're very much alive."

The Benefactors agreed.

"Ideas," they promised, "are much more durable than flesh."

7

Goons ambush Wes.

They're armed with homemade handguns, Molotov cocktails, and

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smoky bombs that explode prematurely, killing two of them. But Wes is delayed for several minutes, which is the goal. He has been dead and tortured for long enough that now their great ship is firing its engines, easing itself into orbit around the glorious moon.

Through a tiny porthole, he sees the moon glowing gray and lifeless beneath him. Where are the craters, the dark mare? There's nothing but a mishmash of angular shapes and domes, some of each shattered, their insides built from more gray shapes and black shadows.

Wes shakes the dead men's blood from his limbs, wanting to summon the Benefactors and ask questions.

But there isn't time. He presses on, running roach-style up an air shaft, reaching the top floors to find mayhem. Burnt, unrecognizable corpses. Incinerated furnishings. The stink of death—a detail that eluded the old VR gamers. Some smudgy freefall fires are choking themselves out of existence, and drifting in their smoke are several long, gaudy golden feathers.

From the bridge comes a muffled blast.

A scream.

Wes starts to leap, then hesitates.

He remembers the layout of the bridge—a roomy, hemispherical chamber straight from a thousand space operas—and he builds an attack plan, then his defensive fallbacks.

Then he launches himself through a smoky hatch, grabbing a railing to break his momentum, a thick blue bolt of electricity setting his hair on fire.

"You!" screams the Neil.

Standing in self-made gravity, the winged deity holds up a severed head. Its body floats nearby, limp and at peace.

"You were right," the Neil admits. "The bastard had already signed my death warrant!"

I can attack him, thinks Wes.

But the bridge is already battered. Cooked electronics, power down, and another battle could leave their ship headless.

Unless.

One choice feels valid, and Wes takes it.

He aims several limbs at the Neil, feigning aggression.

And the Neil strikes him first, fists crashing together, the blast hotter than a thousand blue suns.

8

On the eve of their launch, Wes dreamed of his wife—all the Connies—making love to them in their bedroom, then on the moon's dusty surface.

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The details were vivid, suffused with a glory and purity. Each Connie told him that he was lovely, that he was perfect, and god, how she had missed him, and how could she please him tonight?

How many unfortunate boys, hearing this garbage, had believed it?

How many of them grew up to be unhappy men, unable to find any woman who could match this preposterous ideal?

Aides woke Wes before dawn.

With first light he touched a control, causing a thousand rocket tubes to spout fire.

In an instant, Florida was obliterated. The Atlantic boiled. The tiny, invisible Earth began to fall away.

Hands on the controls, Wes called for the Benefactors.

Nobody else had that power, he had learned.

With his top fifty astronauts on the bridge with him, Wes asked the hovering jellyfish, "Why pick me?"

No response.

"Explain it to me, or I'll steer us straight into the Earth. Believe me, I'll crash us—!"

A nervousness swept through the crew.

But the Benefactors replied, in one voice, "You won't. You would never attempt such an act."

"Why me?" Wes asked again, begging for an answer.

To his surprise, they gave him a clue. "In your long life, what happened to you?"

"I killed Reds."

Silence.

"I screwed my wife."

Silence, then another united voice. "Those are constants, not events. An event has consequences and produces change—"

"My moon mission." Wes gasped, shaking his head. Laughing. Almost giggling. "That's what made me, right? What I am. . . ?"

"You are a poorly drawn character from bad fiction. One dramatic moment created you, and you can't escape from it." The Benefactors paused, then added, "The moon matters to you. Perhaps more than with anyone else here, it is your hub and your womb, and that, simply put, is why we selected you."

Then they were gone.

Blinking astronauts stared at their commander, thinking private thoughts as they waited for orders.

The Nixon gave a little smile, then barked out, "Steady as she goes!"

The magical Neil, standing to Nixon's right, placing his hands together as if to pray, saying, "All systems nominal."

And Wes closed his eyes, not believing the Benefactors, struggling to remember last night's dreams and his wife's knowing touch.

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The Neil fires, aiming to obliterate.

Wes's legs and carapace absorb the blast, melting instantly to slag. His reactor dies. Weapons fail. And he's flung across the smoky room, driven into a wall of dead lights, human arms managing to break the impact and remain whole, then gently shoving him back toward his enemy.

The Neil grins, giving him a hard, long look.

"Dead again," is his verdict.

Feigning death, Wes drifts closer. Then in a blur, he grabs the man's wrists, holding his hands apart, knowing the son-of-a-bitch can't make magic if he can't pray—

"Let go of me!"

—and they fly, the Neil flapping his wings, ramming Wes against the transparent ceiling, then the floor, then the ceiling once more.

"Give it up!"

Surrender tempts. Another taste of death sounds sweet. But the moon watches, beckoning him, and Wes refuses to quit, tightening his grip, using his forehead to pummel the Neil, leaving both of their handsome faces bloodied, unrepentant.

A mad flapping of wings, and they careen into a control panel. The Neil touches his fists to a single circuit, electricity coursing between them, then leaping at Wes.

Wes jerks and twists, pushing away.

The Neil hovers for an instant, free hands meeting in an angelic pose, his expression wickedly amused.

There is motion behind him.

A bulky shape.

The Neil begins to cook Wes, working with a slow thoroughness; then a gloved hand clasps him on the shoulder, and he wheels, killing the intruder by reflex.

Spacesuited figures are flooding through the hatches.

The Neil butchers the first dozen of them before he realizes that they're unarmed, harmless.

He butchers another dozen before he notices the name tags.

And he hesitates.

Dozens of Neils replace the dead, faceplates lifting, pained voices begging him, their twin, to please, please stop this useless fight. Where is the purpose in it? Where is the glory?

"This is a mission of peace," says one.

The magical Neil incinerates him.

Another replaces him, asking, "Will you kill all of us, brother?"

Several more Neils are consumed by fire, but the old zeal is fading. Is

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gone. The deity flies overhead, hovers, and clasps his hands over his teary face.

With little fuss, he vanishes.

A self-induced flame.

A whiff of holy ash.

Then the ventilators are blowing in fresh air, and Wes lets himself die, and the surviving Neils disrobe and set to work, repairing what can be repaired, bringing the ship back toward health.

10

Wes is reborn in the next hours. He sprouts a new reactor, new limbs, and the same mangled body. Meanwhile, the Neils map the moon with a laudable thoroughness. It is a junkyard covered with dead machines, glass cables, and broken masses of metal. They brief their commander, and he thanks them for their timely arrival. Wes knew that a Neil couldn't kill his brothers without it taking a huge toll, and that's why he had asked them to come here. The noblest, simplest Neils; historical clichés incapable of fear or a single false move.

They have found one patch of normal lunar ground. Craters; dust; a sinuous rill. It's barely five miles on a side, they explain, but it looks pristine. Unlikely as that seems.

"It's meant for us," some of them hopefully declare.

Wes, whole again, takes the controls and fires their rockets, changing their orbit, then braking their motion. Just like with Apollo XX, there are some tense moments, a last-instant systems failure, then ultimate success. Scalding gases kick up the dust. Legs deploy. And a ship taller than any skyscraper sets down on the wasteland, straddling the winding rill.

The junkyard stretches away on all sides.

Something else is set closer.

"Some kind of lander," says a Neil.

The Benefactors appear, floating overhead, something in their appearance happy. Even joyous. In a great voice, they explain, "We are in a park. The park was built by the moon's last inhabitants, to honor the first lifeforms to reach this world."

"But that's not our LEM out there," the Neil complains. "It's some kind of probe. Soviet, I think."

"Of course. What appears to be a junkyard isn't."

Wes laughs, saying, "Machines lived here."

"Correct," say the Benefactors.

Machines, he reasons, would choose to honor machines.

The Benefactors say as much. "Mechanical organisms have ruled for

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the last billion years, but they have failed of late. Wars. Environmental changes. Bad fortune and evolution are all to blame." The voices sound amused, even giddy. "We are claiming their old places. By law, custom and moral right, we've reconstituted all of you to lay claim to this world, in our good name."

"Are you organic?" asks Wes. "Do the organics get back on top?"

"Organics are virtually extinct, as the machines will be." Blue-white tendrils extend, touching him. A slick warm happy electric touch. "We are the children of slaves. Our ancestors were owned by organics and the machines, kept to serve our masters, sold and resold, and abused, as, it suited them."

"But what are you?" bark the Neils.

Wes answers for the Benefactors.

"Ideas," he says.

"Dreams," he says.

"Fictions. Notions. Beliefs."

In this age, for whatever reason, ideas have depth and breadth and their own enduring existence. They are life, whether they are Benefactors or the mishmash crew of a preposterous spaceship.

Inheritors of All.

11

Before the ceremonial walk on the surface, Wes gives one last command. The surviving Nixon is brought to him, a Neil on each arm, his blue suit rumpled but the man inside attempting a kind of dignity.

"Hey, Dick. Will you sing for me?"

The Nixon looks at the walls of the airlock, swallows. "Sing? Why?"

"You were part of that big musical. What was it called? *Tranquillity Rap*, right?" It seems like a simple request. "Humor me. Do your famous solo."

The man breaks into a nervous, artless voice. Stumbling over the half-learned words, he begins to sweat, rivers flowing over his face, slow drops falling for the floor.

"Leave us," Wes tells the Neils.

The airlock's inner door is sealed after them.

With a razored claw, Wes picks a tiny bit of vomit from the dampened face. "You put the singing Nixon on the bridge," he says, "and why? To save your ass and get a second chance at my command."

The ex-President and eternal idea flings himself at the cyborg.

Wes smacks the button for the outer door, the atmosphere roaring into the cold vacuum, and he grabs the Nixon, watching the blood vessels in his face burst and his breath slip between capped teeth, making sure that he dies and dies without ever having touched the moon's surface.

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12

Without a pressure suit, Wes suffers. But his carapace synthesizes oxygen, and microchines help repair the damaged flesh. Scampering down the ladder, he comes close to touching the dust; and he hesitates, mouthing one last question:

"So what do I get for my troubles?"

"What we can give," is the voiceless answer. "What we are."

He doesn't understand, but he trusts them enough to step off the pad, pressing one hand into the soft ground.

A promise appears, in his mind.

"We will give each of you the right and freedom to change your stories," he hears. "You may rewrite any element, and we will see to it that you will exist only in your new form. From today until the end of Creation."

Wes takes another step, concentrating.

Deciding.

And now he finds himself standing at the front stoop of his house, the door opening, the original Connie greeting him with nothing but a negligee and a preposterous lusting gaze. Freckles and full breasts, and she says, "You're safe!" as her hands reach for him.

Wes grabs them, giving them a firm twist.

"No," he says, releasing her hands. "We're finished, darling," he says, crab-walking away from her.

Too startled to react, his wife stares at him.

"Find a boring whole man," is his advice. "It's for the best, and aren't I always right, dear?"

She has to nod, whispering, "Yes."

But Wes doesn't hear her, already running along the tree-lined street, then pausing when he sees a neighbor out watering his flowers. A beefy middle-aged man wearing a veteran's cap, he gives Wes a look of horror and fascination, the hose shaking like an angry snake in his hands.

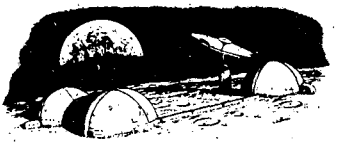
Wes asks for directions.

"VaRoom VR Systems? Yeah, I know the place. The other end of town. The biggest buildings anywhere. . . !"

"Thanks," says the hero, starting to run again.

"Hey, who are you?!" shouts the veteran.

No telling yet, thinks Wes, gaining speed, the world around him beginning to blur. ●



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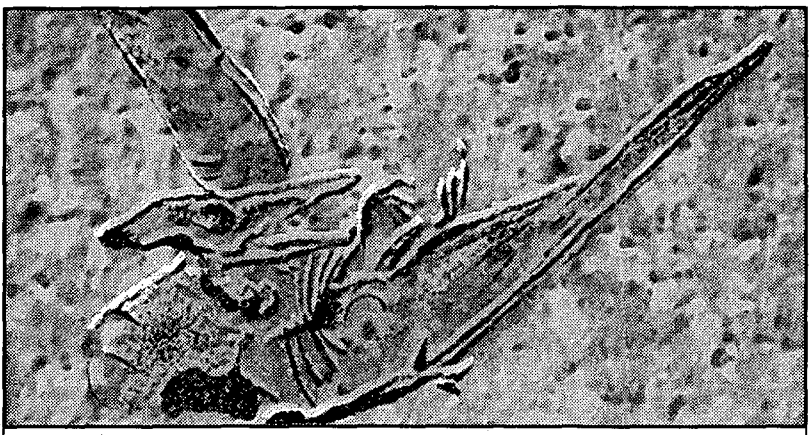

PTERANODON

We find here, pressed in Kansas chalk,
all the bare essentials of some sea-side Cretaceous evening:
a few worm trails, impressions of shellfish,
and the angry last moments of a pteranodon
forced down by God alone remembers what
and reduced to beating its wings
against the wet sand
in a futile effort to rise back into the sky
and thus defy the dictates of Evolution.

Perhaps odd feathery things wheeled overhead
and screeched mockingly.

We find here all the bare essentials of a pteranodon:
a long, narrow skull (a veritable pick-axe of petrified bone);
the ribs and vertebrae, looking for all the world
like the remains of a very well-consumed Thanksgiving turkey;
the elongated digit, which once braced the membranous wing
and is now extended
in a truly timeless gesture of surly ill regard
for mere robins.

—Steven Utley

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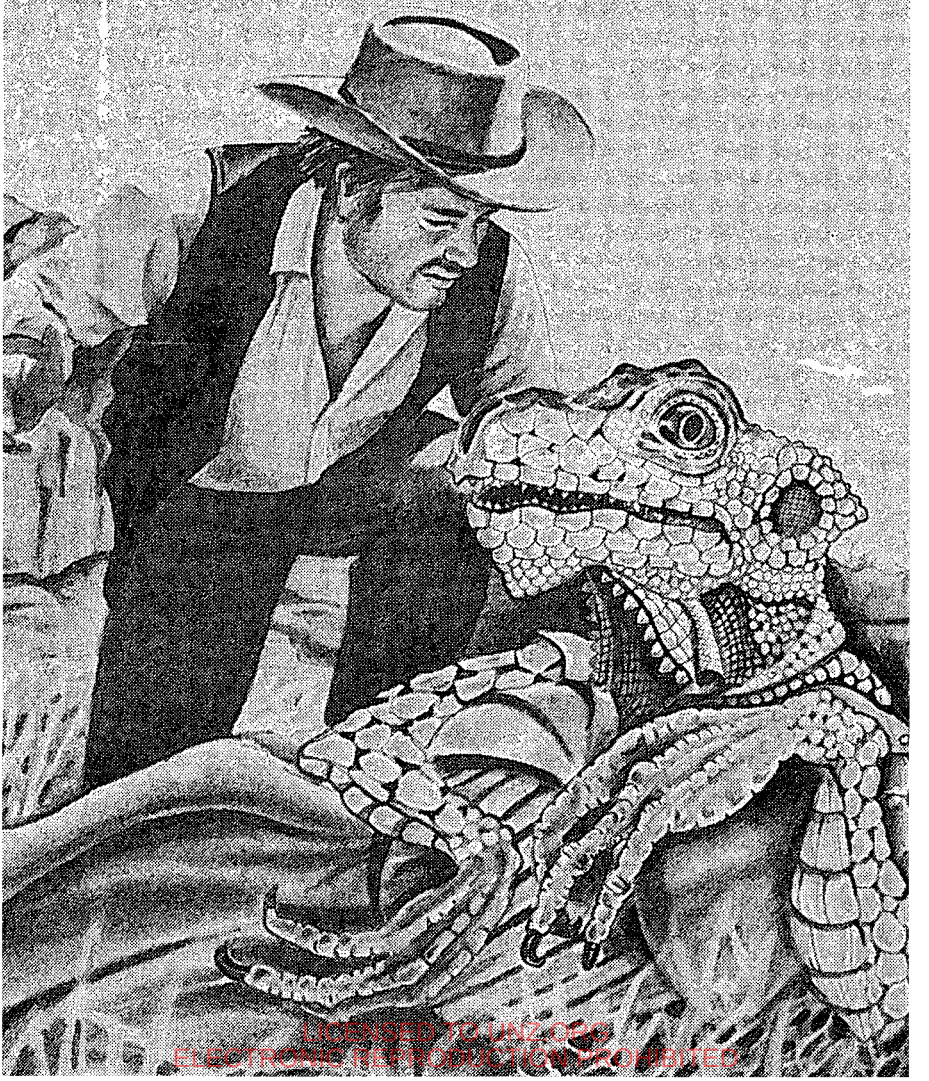
Daniel Marcus

PRAIRIE GODMOTHER

One man finds redemption on the dark and lonely Kansas plains.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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Sometimes it got so bad the only thing Will could do was put a twelve-pack of Budweiser in the old four-by-four, some Hank Williams on the tape machine, and burn up the two-lane straight as a carpenter's rule out into the empty heart of the prairie.

He wasn't a drinking man, not really. But it kind of built up in him slowly, that hollow feeling, like he was one of those dried Indian gourds and there was nothing inside him but a handful of tiny, rattling seeds, hard as stones.

It was more than just missing Rose, although of course he did miss her, every day, even after five years. Will still slept alone under the bedspread she'd made for them with her own small hands, and her needlepoint Lord's Prayer still hung on the living room wall, right over the television.

No, it was more like when she died it left a space in him that never filled, and these trips were like the wind rushing in to claim it.

He was well out of Salina now, coming up onto the intersection with County 7. Will reached over to the carton on the seat next to him, pried out a beer, and pulled the top up one-handed as he turned onto the little blacktop road. It stretched ahead of him, winking in and out of sight with the gentle contours of the land, and Will felt it pulling him forward like a wire to some place beyond the low, distant hills.

Hank was singing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," and Will crooned along with him, belting out the words loud in the cab of the pickup. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view, his leathery face scrunched up like he'd caught his foot in a door. He laughed, and he felt the borders of that darkness in him push back a little farther.

You just keep doin' it for me, Hank. Just don't stop talkin' to me.

Will loved the prairie, everything about it. When you looked at it from a distance it looked smooth and featureless, just miles and miles of tall, waving grass, but when you got up close you could see the wrinkles and scars. There was a rolling motion to the land that was gentle on the eye but sucked the strength out of you on foot, and the contours hid a cross-hatched pattern of stream-beds and hidden arroyos. A person could get lost out here and never get found.

Will had a favorite spot and that's where he was headed. He turned onto a rutted dirt road that snaked around a low hill, and when the road widened just a bit, he pulled over and stopped. He put the beers in a rucksack along with a couple of ham sandwiches neatly wrapped in wax paper, and walked straight out into the waist-high grass, following the faint path.

The land gradually fell, and as it did the grass got higher and higher, until it was over his head and Will felt like he was walking on the bottom of an ocean of rustling tan.

Suddenly, the high grass opened up in front of him and he stood on the edge of a dry stream bed. Rocks of all sizes were scattered in the shallow

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bed, ranging from stones no bigger than a baby's fist to huge, rough boulders the size of a Buick. There was a cluster of big ones downstream a bit, just above a fork in the bed. One of them had a flat, sloping surface perfect for sitting and Will picked his way toward it, stepping from one stone to another along the rough stream bed as if water still flowed between them.

He dropped the rucksack and sat down next to it, wincing with the familiar protest in his knees and back.

Won't be able to do this for much longer, he thought, and shook his head.

He reached into the rucksack and pulled out another beer and a sandwich. He unwrapped the sandwich, carefully re-folded the wax paper into a tight, neat square, and returned it to the pack. He took a big bite and followed it with a long pull of beer. It was so good—the sharp, salty taste of the ham, the cool bitterness of the brew—it almost brought tears to his eyes.

He sat there, drinking and eating, not really thinking about anything. Will liked the way the forks of the stream bed ran off in front of him, gradually diverging, separated by a widening "V" of tall, waving grass. It was getting on to his favorite time of day—late afternoon, the heat coming up out of the ground in waves and the slanted, golden light of the sun just beginning to lose its harsh, midday edge. He wished there was someone around to share it with, and he felt a small surge of sadness wash through him.

Rose. They'd tried to have kids but it just didn't happen. After a few years of disappointment and a cold, growing fear, they took her in for some tests.

"Her equipment's in tip-top condition," the doctor said. Rose was still in the examination room, getting dressed. Will didn't like his false heartiness or the cold, limp handshake he'd proffered. "If I were you," he continued, "I'd see about getting a sperm count myself."

Will was quick to anger in those days, and he almost took a poke at the clean, smug face hovering above the stethoscope-collared jacket like a pale balloon. Instead, he nodded sharply and muttered something, and when his wife emerged from the room he took her arm and hustled her out of there like they were late for something important.

They drove home in silence. About halfway there, when they were sitting at a stop light, Will turned to her.

"They don't know what's wrong," he heard himself saying. "They don't know what the problem is. We could get some more tests, but I don't know how much good it'd do."

Her eyes filled up with tears, but she took his hand.

"We'll just have to keep trying, Will. Something's gotta happen sooner or later."

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He turned away and put both hands on the steering wheel, waiting for the light to change.

On his own, without telling Rose, he went to another doctor and had his own tests done. Sure enough, all those years he'd been shooting blanks. He'd worked the machine shop at Rocky Flats for a few years back in the sixties, and that must've done it. They'd handed out some safety pamphlets—comic books, really. Will remembered the stylized logo stamped across the front of the gaudy covers—the looping, crossed ellipses of the electron orbits framing a round, smiling face where the nucleus was supposed to be. Andy the Atom. The pamphlets made radiation sound safe as shuffleboard. Just take a few simple precautions and you'll be fine.

Will never told her. He waited for years for the cancer to take him like it took so many of his friends from the plant, but it got her instead. He never told her and now she was gone and it was too late to take back the lie. His stupid pride. Too late.

He upended the beer, draining out the last few drops, and put the empty in the rucksack, smiling to himself a little as he heard it rattle against the growing collection of empties.

We're gettin' there, he thought. *Feelin' no pain.*

As he was reaching around in the rucksack for another full one, he heard a low whistling sound coming from out of the western sky, getting louder. He looked up and his mouth fell open. The beer slipped out of his hands and rolled down off the rock, bursting open with an explosive hiss when it hit the stream bed.

It came in low, about a hundred feet above the prairie. It was long and thin, a featureless ellipsoid about the size of a jetliner. A dull, metallic black, it seemed to suck the waning afternoon light into itself like a sponge. And it was burning.

It passed over Will's head with a roar that nearly burst his eardrums, trailing a wake of oily looking smoke, and went down somewhere beyond a low, grassy hill about a quarter-mile away.

Will tensed, waiting for an explosion, but none came.

What the hell was *that thing?* he wondered.

Maybe something new out of the SAC base up at Omaha. He'd heard plenty of stories, and the pictures he'd seen of the new B-1 bomber looked like something out of a science fiction movie. Even if the damn thing couldn't fly. A part of him knew, though, that this thing was just too strange, even for SAC. It didn't have any wings, for one thing. And the way it held the light—kind of rippling, almost disappearing, when you looked right at it . . .

Will laughed out loud and shook his head.

A goddamn spaceship. Little green men. Boy howdy, Will, have another beer.

Still, he couldn't tell how hard the thing went down—there might be someone hurt. He slung the rucksack over his shoulder, headed down the

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left fork of the stream bed. A wisp of smoke curled up beyond the hill, marking the spot.

He was a little drunk, and he stumbled a couple of times on the uneven ground. He wasn't scared, not exactly, but he felt mixed up. A part of him was putting one foot in front of the other, pushing him forward, wanting nothing but to be there to help if someone was in need. Another part of him, though, way down deep, wanted to turn tail and run like hell.

As he neared the spot, the breeze brought him a sharp, metallic, burnt wiring sort of smell, and underneath it, the familiar odor of burning grass. They'd had some rain recently, so hopefully it wouldn't catch. Will had seen a prairie fire once, and that was enough.

As he got closer, the feeling of unease intensified. Still, he kept walking, one step at a time, one foot in front of the other. *Like Inchon,* Will thought. *Scared shitless but showin' up.*

He climbed up out of the stream bed and started pushing through the waist-high grass. A smoky haze hung in the air. Suddenly, he came to a wide swath of flattened grass and torn earth. Patches of fire licked feebly here and there, but they were well separated and looked like they wouldn't last long.

He looked down the length of the swath and could make out a shape a couple of hundred yards away, partially hidden by the hazy smoke.

This isn't no Air Force stealth gizmo on a training run, he thought.

He wished suddenly for the Remington sitting in his gun rack back in the pickup. The smoke was starting to get to him—his eyes stung and there was a raw, rasping pain in his throat. Still, he had to keep going. Ignoring the clenching fear in his stomach and the protesting ache in his bones, he began to run down the corridor of ruined earth toward the thing, picking his way between the fires.

It materialized out of the haze, almost as if drawing substance from the smoke itself, a huge, black shape. It lay in a patch of scorched earth, crumpled and broken. A wide scar ran down one side, splitting it open, and Will caught glimpses of flickering lights through the smoke.

He stopped, trying to catch his breath. He drew in a great lungful of air and smoke, and he doubled over in a spasm of coughing.

He felt something then, a kind of tugging at the edge of his mind.

Here, it seemed to say. *I am here.* But it wasn't really words—that was just the best way Will's mind could get hold of it. It was more like a kind of *knowing.* And it was also in that knowing that Will realized suddenly he had nothing to fear.

He approached the crippled ship. Near the tear in its side, half-hidden by the curved, crumpled fuselage, lay a human form. Will ran closer and saw with a shock that he was almost right. It had a rounded body covered in folds of metallic-looking cloth, and the right number of arms and legs, but the face was like nothing Will had ever seen before.

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Blue, scaly skin stretched tight across a triangular jaw. A lipless mouth revealed thin, needle-like teeth and there was a single vertical slit where the nose was supposed to be. Narrow, bony ridges protruded above wide, golden eyes that held Will's own in an intense stare. A thin line of dark blood ran out of the corner of its mouth.

Red, Will thought. *Red blood.*

He felt strangely calm. He knelt down next to the creature, reached out a hand, then pulled it back. He didn't know what to do.

The creature opened its mouth and made a sound from deep in its throat, like the last gulp of water emptying from a jug. It sounded like "gog."

Will spread his hands. "I don't—"

"Gog," it said again, more forcefully this time. It pulled aside a fold of its silvery garment to reveal a scaly pocket of skin along its midriff, rippling and bunching like there was something moving around down there.

Suddenly, a head popped up through the leathery flap. The same triangular face, the same big, golden eyes.

"Goddamn!" Will said.

He felt it again, that *contact,* a feather-touch on the surface of his mind. Will didn't hear it in words, but he knew that this creature was dying, that it wanted him to save its child. He also knew somehow that they could live here, that their bodies weren't really all that different. And he knew, without that voice telling him so, that they weren't all that different as souls either, that they moved to the dictates of something that was larger than themselves, something like love. It was enough for Will.

"Come on, little feller." Will reached down and the thing crawled out of its pocket and swarmed up his arms.

Go.

He felt that touch in his mind again, but it was *pushing* this time. *Go. Leave. Go.* The voice was still powerful, even though Will could see the life beginning to flicker and fade in the thing's eyes. He took a last look, nodded sharply, and began to run back along the corridor of burned, flattened grass, the child-thing clinging tightly to his arms.

When they were back at the stream bed, about a half-mile away, the ground lit up like a flashbulb had gone off and Will felt a wash of radiant heat on the back of his neck. He could feel the presence of that voice in his mind wink out like a light being turned off. The creature in his arms made a whimpering sound and burrowed more tightly into his chest.

He turned around. A small mushroom cloud rose up into the darkening sky.

Destroying the evidence, Will thought. *Smart goddamn lizard.*

He looked down. The thing was curled up against his chest and all he could see was the top of its head. A pattern of fine scales caught highlights in the waning light.

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"So what the hell am I gonna do with *you?*" he asked. "And what am I supposed to call you?"

He shook his head, then laughed out loud.

Sure. Yeah, why not?

He thought maybe he'd name it Hank. ●

CLARION WEST

Contact: Amy Hanson, 206/756-1805

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Applications are now being accepted for the 1996 Clarion West Writer's Workshop in Seattle. This intensive six-week workshop prepares writers for professional careers in science fiction and fantasy.

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Applications should be postmarked on or before April 1, 1996 and sent to Clarion West, Suite 350, 15th Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98112. (Applications received before March 1 will receive a $100 reduction in tuition.)

A complete application includes:

*a cover letter discussing who you are and why you want to attend the workshop,

*twenty to thirty pages of typed, double-spaced original manuscript (one to two short stories or a novel excerpt with outline),

*a non-refundable $25 application fee payable to Clarion West,

*completed financial aid forms (limited financial aid is available; forms should be requested in advance by writing to Clarion West, by calling 206/322-9083, or by email at L.HOWLE@GENIE.COM).

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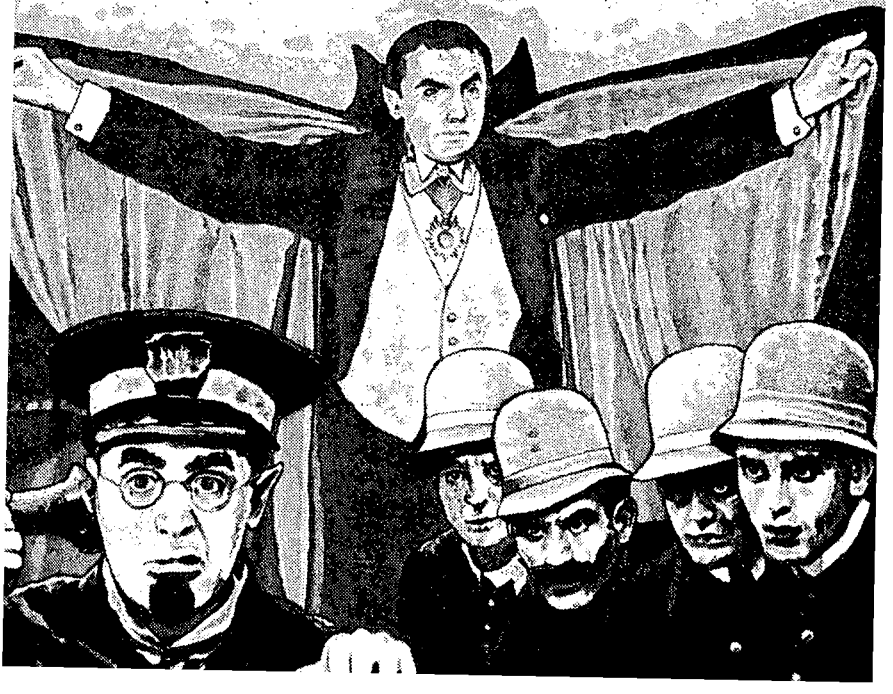
Howard Waldrop

FLATFEET!

In Howard Waldrop's last tale for *Asimov's*, "Fin de Cycle" (Mid-December 1991), he demonstrated his expertise at fitting real people into stories. Indeed, the London Sunday *Times* has called him "the greatest unknown practitioner of the art." In a madcap manner that would delight the director of *The Keystone Kops*, his masterful new story weaves together dozens of references to people and events from early in the twentieth century.

Illustration by Ron Chironna



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1912

Captain Teeheezal turned his horse down toward the station house just as the Pacific Electric streetcar clanged to a stop at the intersection of Sunset and Ivar.

It was just 7 A.M. so only three people got off at the stop. Unless they worked at one of the new moving-picture factories a little further out in the valley, there was no reason for someone from the city to be in the town of Wilcox before the stores opened.

The motorman twisted his handle, there were sparks from the overhead wire, and the streetcar belled off down the narrow tracks. Teeheezal watched it recede, with the official sign *No Shooting Rabbits from the Rear Platform* over the back door.

"G'hup, Pear," he said to his horse. It paid no attention and walked at the same speed.

By and by he got to the police station. Patrolman Rube was out watering the zinnias that grew to each side of the porch. Teeheezal handed him the reins to his horse.

"What's up, Rube?"

"Not much, Cap'n," he said. "Shoulda been here yesterday. Sgt. Fatty brought by two steelhead and a coho salmon he caught, right where Pye Creek empties into the L.A. River. Big as your leg, all three of 'em. Took up the whole back of his wagon."

"I mean police business, Rube."

"Oh." The patrolman lifted his domed helmet and scratched. "Not that I know of."

"Well, anybody in the cells?"

"Uh, lessee . . ."

"I'll talk to the sergeant," said Teeheezal. "Make sure my horse stays in his stall."

"Sure thing, Captain." He led it around back.

The captain looked around at the quiet streets. In the small park across from the station, with its few benches and small artesian fountain, was the big sign *No Spooning by Order of Wilcox P.D.* Up toward the northeast the sun was coming full up over the hills.

Sgt. Hank wasn't at his big high desk. Teeheezal heard him banging around in the squad room to the left. The captain spun the blotter book around.

There was one entry:

Sat. 11:20 P.M. Jimson H. Friendless, actor, of Los Angeles City, d & d. Slept off, cell 2. Released Sunday 3 P.M. Arr. off. Patrolmen Buster and Chester.

Sgt. Hank came in. "Oh hello, chief."

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"Where'd this offense take place?" He tapped the book.

"The Blondeau Tavern . . . uh, Station," said the sergeant.

"Oh." That was just inside his jurisdiction, but since the Wilcox village council had passed a local ordinance against the consumption and sale of alcohol, there had been few arrests.

"He probably got tanked somewhere in L.A. and got lost on the way home," said Sgt. Hank. "Say, you hear about them fish Sgt. Fatty brought in?"

"Yes, I did." He glared at Sgt. Hank.

"Oh. Okay. Oh, there's a postal card that came in the Saturday mail from Captain Angus for us all. I left it on your desk."

"Tell me if any big trouble happens," said Teeheezal. He went into the office and closed his door. Behind his desk was a big wicker rocking chair he'd had the village buy for him when he took the job early in the year. He sat down in it, took off his flat-billed cap, and put on his reading glasses.

Angus had been the captain before him for twenty-two years; he'd retired and left to see some of the world. (He'd been one of the two original constables when Colonel Wilcox laid out the planned residential village.) Teeheezal had never met the man.

He picked up the card—a view of Le Havre, France from the docks. Teeheezal turned it over. It had a Canadian postmark, and one half had the address: The Boys in Blue, Police HQ, Wilcox, Calif. U.S.A. The message read:

—Well, took a boat. You might have read about it. Had a snowball fight on deck while waiting to get into the lifeboats. The flares sure were pretty. We were much overloaded by the time we were picked up. (Last time I take a boat named for some of the minor Greek godlings.) Will write again soon.

—Angus

PS: pretty good dance band.

Teeheezal looked through the rest of the mail; wanted posters for guys three thousand miles away, something from the attorney general of California, a couple of flyers for political races that had nothing to do with the village of Wilcox.

The captain put his feet up on his desk, made sure they were nowhere near the kerosene lamp or the big red bellpull wired to the squad room, placed his glasses in their case, arranged his Farmer John tuft beard to one side, clasped his fingers across his chest, and began to snore.

The murder happened at the house of one of the curators, across the street from the museum.

Patrolman Buster woke the captain up at his home at four A.M. The Los Angeles County coroner was already there when Teeheezal arrived on his horse.

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The door of the house had been broken down. The man had been strangled and then thrown back behind the bed where the body lay twisted with one foot out the open window sill.

"Found him just like that, the neighbors did," said Patrolman Buster. "Heard the ruckus, but by the time they got dressed and got here, whoever did it was gone."

Teeheezal glanced out the broken door. The front of the museum across the way was lit with electric lighting.

"Hmmmm," said the coroner, around the smoke from his El Cubano cigar. "They's dust all over this guy's py-jamas." He looked around. "Part of a print on the bedroom doorjamb, and a spot on the floor."

Patrolman Buster said "Hey! One on the front door. Looks like somebody popped it with a dirty towel."

The captain went back out on the front porch. He knelt down on the lawn, feeling with his hands.

He spoke to the crowd that had gathered out front. "Who's a neighbor here?" A man stepped out, waved. "He water his yard last night?"

"Yeah, just after he got off work."

Teeheezal went to the street and lay down.

"Buster, look here." The patrolman flopped down beside him. "There's some lighter dust on the gravel, see it?" Buster nodded his thin face. "Look over there, see?"

"Looks like mud, chief." They crawled to the right to get another angle, jumped up, looking at the doorway of the museum.

"Let's get this place open," said the chief.

"I was just coming over; they called me about Fielding's death, when your ruffians came barging in," said the museum director, whose name was Carter Lord. "There was no need to rush me so." He had on suit pants but pyjama tops and a dressing gown.

"Shake a leg, pops," said Patrolman Buster.

There was a sign on the wall near the entrance: The Treasures of Pharaoh Rut-en-tut-en April 20–June 13.

The doors were steel; there were two locks Lord had to open. On the inside was a long push bar that operated them both.

"Don't touch anything, but tell me if something's out o' place," said Teeheezal.

Lord used a handkerchief to turn on the light switches.

He told them the layout of the place and the patrolmen took off in all directions.

There were display cases everywhere, and ostrich-looking fans, a bunch of gaudy boxes, things that looked like coffins. On the walls were paintings of people wearing diapers, standing sideways. At one end of the hall was a big upright wooden case. Patrolman Buster pointed out two

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dabs of mud just inside the door, a couple of feet apart. Then another a little further on, leading toward the back, then nothing.

Teeheezal looked around at all the shiny jewelry. "Rich guy?" he asked.

"Priceless," said Carter Lord. "Tomb goods, buried with him for the afterlife. The richest find yet in Egypt. We were very lucky to acquire it."

"How come you gettin' it?"

"We're a small, but a growing museum. It was our expedition—the best untampered tomb. Though there were skeletons in the outer corridors, and the outside seal had been broken, I'm told. Grave robbers had broken in but evidently got no further."

"How come?"

"Who knows?" asked Lord. "We're dealing with 4,500 years."

Patrolman Buster whistled.

Teeheezal walked to the back. Inside the upright case was the grey swaddled shape of a man, twisted, his arms across his chest, one eye closed, a deep open hole where the other had been. Miles of grey curling bandages went round and round and round him, making him look like a cartoon patient in a lost hospital.

"This the guy?"

"Oh, heavens no," said Carter Lord. "The Pharaoh Rut-en-tut-en's mummy is on loan to the Field Museum in Chicago for study. This is probably some priest or minor noble who was buried for some reason with him. There were no markings on this case," he said, knocking on the plain wooden case. "The pharaoh was in that nested three-box sarcophagus over there."

Teeheezal leaned closer. He reached down and touched the left foot of the thing.

"Please don't touch that." said Carter Lord.

The patrolmen returned from their search of the building. "Nobody here but us *gendarmerie*," said Patrolman Rube.

"C'mere, Rube." said Teeheezal. "Reach down and touch this foot."

Rube looked into the box, jerked back. "Cripes! What an ugly! Which foot?"

"Both."

He did. "So?"

"One of them feel wet?"

Rube scratched his head. "I'm not sure."

"I asked you to *please* not touch that," said Carter Lord. "You're dealing with very fragile, irreplaceable things here."

"He's conducting a murder investigation here, bub," said Patrolman Mack.

"I understand that. But nothing here has committed murder, at least not for the last four thousand five hundred years. I'll have to ask that you desist."

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Teeheezal looked at the face of the thing again. It looked back at him with a deep open hole where one eye had been, the other closed. Just—

The hair on Teeheezal's neck stood up. "Go get the emergency gun from the wagon," said the chief, not taking his eyes off the thing in the case.

"I'll have to *insist* that you leave *now!*" said Carter Lord.

Teeheezal reached over and pulled up a settee with oxhorn arms on it and sat down, facing the thing. He continued to stare at it. Somebody put the big heavy revolver in his hand.

"All you, go outside, except Rube. Rube, keep the door open so you can see me. Nobody do anything until I say so."

"That's the last straw!" said Carter Lord. "Who do I call to get you to cease and desist?"

"Take him where he can call the mayor, Buster."

Teeheezal stared and stared. The dead empty socket looked back at him. Nothing moved in the museum, for a long, long time. The revolver grew heavier and heavier. The chief's eyes watered. The empty socket stared back, the arms lay motionless across the twisted chest. Teeheezal stared.

"Rube!" he said after a longer time. He heard the patrolman jerk awake.

"Yeah, chief?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, I think about now, Captain, that they've got the mayor all agitated, and a coupla aldermen, and five, maybe ten minutes ago somebody's gonna have figured out that though the murder happened in Wilcox, right now you're sitting in Los Angeles."

Without taking his eyes from the thing, Teeheezal asked, "Are you funnin' me?"

"I never fun about murder, chief."

Three carloads of Los Angeles Police came around the corner on six wheels. They slammed to a stop, the noise of the hand-cranked sirens dying on the night. By now the crowd outside the place had grown to a couple of hundred.

What greeted the eyes of the Los Angeles Police was the Wilcox police wagon with its four horses in harness, most of the force, a crowd, and a small fire on the museum lawn across the street from the murder house.

Two legs were sticking sideways out of the fire. The wrappings flamed against the early morning light. Sparks rose up and swirled.

The chief of the Los Angeles Police Department walked up to where the captain poked at the fire with the butt end of a spear. Carter Lord and the Wilcox mayor, and a Los Angeles city councilman trailed behind the L.A. chief.

"Hello, Bob," said Teeheezal.

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With a pop and a flash of cinders, the legs fell the rest of the way into the fire, and the wrappings roared up to nothingness.

"Teeheezal! What the hell do you think you're doing!? Going out of your jurisdiction, no notification. It looks like you're burning up Los Angeles City property here! Why didn't you call us?"

"Didn't have time, Bob," said Teeheezal. "I was in hot pursuit."

They all stood watching until the fire was out, then all climbed into their cars and wagons and drove away. The crowd dispersed, leaving Carter Lord in his dressing gown. With a sigh, he turned and went into the museum.

1913

If southern California had seasons, this would have been another late spring.

Teeheezal was at his desk, reading a letter from his niece Katje from back in Pennsylvania, where all his family but him had been for six generations.

There was a knock on his door. "What? What?" he yelled.

Patrolman Al stuck his head in. "Another card from Captain Angus. The sergeant said to give it to you."

He handed it to Teeheezal and left swiftly. Patrolman Al had once been a circus acrobat, and the circus had folded in Los Angeles City two years ago. He was a short thin wiry man, one of Teeheezal's few smooth-shaven patrolmen.

The card was a view of the Eiffel Tower, had a Paris postmark, with the usual address on the back right side. On the left:

—Well, went to the Ballet last night. You would of thought someone spit on the French flag. Russians jumpin' around like Kansas City fools, Frogs punching each other out, women sticking umbrellas up guy's snouts. I been to a rodeo, a county fair, six picnics, and I have seen the Elephant, but this was pretty much the stupidest display of art appreciation I ever *saw. Will write again soon.*

—Angus

PS: ooh-lah-lah

"Hmmph!" said Teeheezal. He got up and went out into the desk area. Sergeant Hank had a stack of picture frames on his desk corner. He was over at the wall under the pictures of the mayor and the village aldermen. He had a hammer and was marking five spots for nails on the plaster with the stub of a carpenter's pencil.

"What's all this, then?" asked the captain.

"My pictures got in yesterday, chief." said Sgt. Hank. "I was going to put 'em up on this wall I have to stare at all day."

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"Well, I can see how looking at the mayor's no fun." said Teeheezal. He picked up the top picture. It was a landscape. There was a guy chasing a deer in one corner, and some trees and teepees, and a bay, and a funny-shaped rock on a mountain in the distance.

He looked at the second. The hill with the strange rock was in it, but people had on sheets, and there were guys drawing circles and squares in the dirt and talking in front of little temples and herding sheep. It looked to be by the same artist.

"It's not just paintings," said Sgt. Hank, coming over to him. "It's a series by Thomas Cole, the guy who started what's referred to as the Hudson River School of painting way back in New York State, about eighty years ago. It's called *The Course of Empire.* Them's the first two—*The Savage State* and *The Pastoral or Arcadian State.* This next one's called *The Consummation of Empire*—see, there's this guy riding in a triumphal parade on an elephant, and there are these armies, all in this city like Rome or Carthage, it's been built here, and they're bringing stuff back from all over the world, and things are dandy."

Hank was more worked up than the chief had ever seen him. "But look at this next one, see, the jig is up. It's called *The Destruction of Empire.* All them buildings are on fire, and there's a rainstorm, and people like Mongols are killing everybody in them big wide avenues, and busting up statues and looting the big temples, and bridges are falling down, and there's smoke everywhere."

Teeheezal saw the funny-shaped mountain was over in one corner of those two paintings.

"Then there's the last one, #5, *The Ruins of Empire.* Everything's quiet and still, all the buildings are broken, the woods are taking back everything, it's going back to the land. See, look there, there's pelicans nesting on top of that broken column, and the place is getting covered with ivy and briers and stuff. I ordered all these from a museum back in New York City," said Hank, proudly.

Teeheezal was still looking at the last one.

"And look," said Sgt. Hank, going back to the first one. "It's not just paintings, it's philosophical. See, here in the first one, it's just after dawn. Man's in his infancy. So's the day. Second one—pastoral, it's midmorning. Consummation—that's at noon. First three paintings all bright and clear. But destruction—that's in the afternoon, there's storms and lightning. Like nature's echoing what's going on with mankind, see? And the last one. Sun's almost set, but it's clear again, peaceful, like, you know, Nature takes its time. . . ."

"Sgt. Hank," said Teeheezal, "When a guy gets arrested and comes in here drunk and disorderly, the last thing he wants to be bothered by is some philosophy."

"But, Chief," said Sgt. Hank, "it's about the rise and fall of civilizations. . . ."

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"What the hell does running a police station have to do with civilization?" said Teeheezal. "You can hang one of 'em up. One at a time they look like nature views, and those don't bother anybody."

"All right, Chief." said Sgt. Hank.

That day, it was the first one. When Teeheezal arrived for work the next day, it was the second. And after that, the third, and on through the five pictures, one each day, then the sequence was repeated. Teeheezal never said a word. Neither did Hank.

1914

There had been murders three nights in a row in Los Angeles City when the day came for the Annual Wilcox Police vs Firemen Baseball Picnic.

The patrolmen were all playing stripped down to their undershirts and uniform pants, while the firemen had on real flannel baseball outfits that said Hot Papas across the back. It was late in the afternoon, late in the game, the firemen ahead 17–12 in the eighth.

They were playing in the park next to the observatory. The patrol wagon was unhitched from its horses; the fire wagon stood steaming with its horses still in harness. Everyone in Wilcox knew not to bother the police or fireman this one day of the year.

Patrolman Al came to bat on his unicycle. He rolled into the batter's box. Patrolman Mack was held on second, and Patrolman Billy was hugging third. The firemen started their chatter. The pitcher wound up, took a long stretch and fired his goofball from behind his back with his glove hand while his right arm went through a vicious fastball motion.

Al connected with a meaty *crack;* the outfielders fell all over themselves and then charged toward the Bronson place. Al wheeled down to first with blinding speed, swung wide ignoring the fake from the second baseman, turned between second and third, balancing himself in a stop while he watched the right fielder come up with the ball on the first bounce four hundred feet away.

He leaned almost to the ground, swung around, became a blur of pedals and pumping feet, passed third; the catcher got set, pounding his mitt, stretched out for the throw. The umpire leaned down, the ball bounced into the mitt, the catcher jerked around—

Al hung upside down, still seated on the unicycle, six feet in the air over the head of the catcher, motionless, sailing forward in a long somersault.

He came down on home plate with a thud and a bounce.

"Safe!" said the ump, sawing the air to each side.

The benches emptied as the catcher threw off his wire mask. Punches flew like they did after every close call.

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Teeheezal and Sgt. Hank stayed on the bench eating a bag of peanuts. The people in the stands were yelling and laughing.

"Oh, almost forgot," said Sgt. Hank, digging in his pants pocket. "Here." He handed Teeheezal a postcard. It had an illegible postmark in a language with too many z's. The front was an engraving of the statue of a hero whose name had six K's in it.

—Well, was at a cafe. Bunch of seedy-looking students sitting at the table next to mine grumbling in Slavvy talk. This car come by filled with plumed hats, made a wrong turn and started to back up. One of the students jumped on the running board and let some air into the guy in the back seat—'bout five shots I say. Would tell you more but I was already lighting out for the territory. Place filled up with more police than anywhere I ever seen but the B.P.O.P.C. convention in Chicago back in '09. This was all big excitement last week but I'm sure it will blow over. Will write more soon.

—Angus

PS: Even here, we got the news the Big Ditch is finally open.

It was the bottom of the eleventh and almost too dark to see when the bleeding man staggered onto left field and fell down.

The man in the cloak threw off all six patrolmen. Rube used the emergency pistol he'd gotten from the wagon just before the horses went crazy and broke the harness, scattering all the picnic stuff everywhere. He emptied the revolver into the tall dark man without effect. The beady-eyed man swept Rube aside with one hand and came toward Teeheezal.

The captain's foot slipped in all the stuff from the ball game.

The man in the dark cloak hissed and smiled crookedly, his eyes red like a rat's.

Teeheezal reached down and picked up a Louisville Slugger. He grabbed it by the sweet spot, smashed the handle against the ground, and shoved the jagged end into the guy's chest.

"Merde!" said the man, and fell over.

Rube stood panting beside him. "I never missed, chief," he said. "All six shots in the space of a half-dime."

"I saw," said Teeheezal, wondering at the lack of blood all over the place.

"*That* was my favorite piece of lumber," said Patrolman Mack.

"We'll get you a new one," said the captain.

They had the undertaker keep the body in his basement, waiting for somebody to claim it. After the investigation, they figured no one would, and they were right. But the law was the law.

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Sgt. Hank scratched his head and turned to the chief, as they were looking at the man's effects.

"Why is it," he asked, "we're always having trouble with things in boxes?"

1915

Teeheezal got off the streetcar at the corner of what used to be Sunset and Ivar, but which the village council had now renamed, in honor of a motion picture studio out to the northwest, Sunset and Bison. Teeheezal figured some money had changed hands.

The P.E. Street Railway car bell jangled rapidly as it moved off toward Mount Lowe and the Cawston Ostrich Farms, and on down toward San Pedro.

In the park across from the station, Patrolmen Chester and Billy, almost indistinguishable behind their drooping walrus mustaches, were rousting out a couple, pointing to the *No Sparking* sign near the benches. He stood watching until the couple moved off down the street, while Billy and Chester, pleased with themselves, struck noble poses.

He went inside. The blotter on the desk was open:

Tues. 2:14 A.M. Two men, Alonzo Partain and D. Falcher Greaves, no known addresses, moving picture acting extras, arrested d & d and on suspicion of criminal intent, in front of pawn shop at Gower and Sunset. Dressed in uniforms of the G.A.R. and the Confederate States and carrying muskets. Griffith studio notified. Released on bond to Jones, business manager, 4:30 A.M. Ptlmn. Mack. R.D.O.T.

The last phrase officially meant Released until Day Of Trial, but was stationhouse for Rub-Down with Oak Towel, meaning Patrolman Mack, who was 6'11" and 350 pounds, had had to use considerable force dealing with them.

"Mack have trouble?" he asked Sgt. Hank.

"Not that Fatty said. In fact, he said when Mack carried them in, they were sleeping like babies."

"What's this Griffith thing?"

"Movie company out in Edendale, doing a War Between the States picture. Mack figured they were waiting 'til the hock shop opened to pawn their rifles and swords. This guy Jones was ready to blow his top, said they sneaked off the location late yesterday afternoon."

Teeheezal picked up the newspaper from the corner of the sergeant's desk. He scanned the headlines and decks. "What do you think of that?" he asked. "Guy building a whole new swanky residential area, naming it for his wife?"

"Ain't that something?" said Sgt. Hank. "Say, there's an ad for the new

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Little Tramp flicker, bigger than the film it's playing with. That man's a caution! He's the funniest guy I ever seen in my life. I hear he's a Limey. Got a mustache like an afterthought."

"I don't think anybody's been really funny since Flora Finch and John Bunny," said Teeheezal. "This Brit'll have to go some to beat *John Bunny Commits Suicide.*"

"Well, you should give him a try," said Sgt. Hank. "Oh, forgot yesterday. Got another from Captain Angus. Here go." He handed it to Teeheezal.

It had a view of Lisbon, Portugal as seen from some mackeral-slapper church tower, the usual address, and on the other half:

—Well I had another boat sink out from under me. This time it was a kraut torpedo, and we was on a neutral ship. Had trouble getting into the lifeboats because of all the crates of howitzer shells on deck. Was pulled down by the suck when she went under. Saw airplane bombs and such coming out the holes in the sides while I was under water. Last time I take a boat called after the Roman name for a third-rate country. Will write again soon.

—Angus

PS: How about the Willard–Johnson fight ?

The windows suddenly rattled. Then came dull booms from far away.

"What's that?"

"Probably the Griffith people. They're filming the battle of Chickamauga or something. Out in the country, way past the Ince Ranch, even."

"What they using, nitro?"

"Beats me. But there's nothing we can do about it. They got a county permit."

"Sometimes," said Teeheezal, "I think motion picture companies is running the town of Wilcox. And the whole U.S. of A. for that matter."

1916

Jesus Christ, smoking a cigar, drove by in a Model T.

Then the San Pedro trolleycar went by, full of Assyrians, with their spears and shields sticking out the windows. Teeheezal stood on the corner, hands on hips, watching them go by.

Over behind the corner of Prospect and Talmadge the walls of Babylon rose up, with statues of bird-headed guys and dancing elephants everywhere, and big moveable towers all around it. There were scaffolds and girders everywhere, people climbing up and down like ants. A huge banner stretched across the eight-block lot: *D.W. Griffith Production The Mother and the Law.*

He walked back to the station-house. Outside, the patrolmen were

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waxing the shining new black box-like truck with Police Patrol painted on the sides. It had brass hand-cranked sirens outside each front door, and brass handholds along each side above the runningboards. They'd only had it for three days, and had yet to use it for a real emergency, though they'd joy-rode it a couple of times, sirens screaming, with the whole force hanging on or inside it, terrifying the fewer and fewer horses on the streets. Their own draught-horses had been put out to pasture at Sgt. Fatty's farm, and the stable out back converted into a garage.

The village fathers had also wired the station-house for electricity, and installed a second phone in Teeheezal's office, along with an electric alarm bell for the squad room on his desk.

The town was growing. It was in the air. Even some moving pictures now said Made in Wilcox, U.S.A. at the end of them.

The blotter, after a busy weekend, was blank.

The postcard was on his desk. It had an English postmark, and was a view of the River Liffey.

—Well, with the world the way it is, I thought the Old Sod would be a quiet place for the holiday. Had meant to write you boys a real letter, so went to the Main Post Office. Thought I'd have the place to myself. Boy was I wrong about that. Last time I look for peace and quiet on Easter Sunday. Will write more later.

—Angus

PS: This will play heck with Daylight Summer Time.

Teeheezal was asleep when the whole force burst into his office and Sgt. Hank started unlocking the rack with the riot guns and rifles.

"What the ding-dong?" yelled Teeheezal, getting up off the floor.

"They say Pancho Villa's coming!" yelled a patrolman. "He knocked over a coupla banks in New Mexico!"

Teeheezal held up his hand. They all stopped moving. He sat back down in his chair and put his feet back up on his desk.

"Call me when he gets to Long Beach," he said.

Sgt. Hank locked the rack back up, then they all tiptoed out of the office.

—Look out! Get 'im! Get 'im! Watch it!!—

The hair-covered man tore the cell bars away and was gone into the moonlit night.

"Read everything you can, Hank," said Teeheezal. "Nothing else has worked."

"You sure you know what to do?" asked the captain.

"I know exactly *what* to do," said Patrolman Al. "I just don't *like* it. Are you sure Sgt. Hank is right?"

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"Well, no. But if you got a better idea, tell me."

Al swallowed hard. He was on his big unicycle, the one with the chain drive. There was a woman's scream from across the park.

"Make sure he's after *you,*" said Teeheezal. "See you at the place. And, Al . . ."

"Say 'break a leg,' Captain."

"Uh . . . break a leg, Al."

Al was gone. They jumped in the police patrol truck and roared off.

They saw them coming through the moonlight, something on a wheel and a loping shape.

Al was nearly horizontal as he passed, eyes wide, down the ramp at the undertaker's, and across the cellar room. Patrolman Buster closed his eyes and jerked the vault door open at the second before Al would have smashed into it. Al flew in, chain whizzing, and something with hot meat breath brushed Buster.

Patrolman Al went up the wall and did a flip. The thing crashed into the wall under him. As Al went out, he jerked the broken baseball bat out of the guy it had been in for two years.

There was a hiss and a snarl behind him as he went out the door that Buster, eyes still closed, slammed to and triple-locked, then Mack and Billy dropped the giant steel bar in place.

Al stopped, then he and the unicycle fainted.

There were crashes and thumps for two hours, then whimpering sounds and squeals for a while.

They went in and beat what was left with big bars of silver, and put the broken Louisville Slugger back in what was left of the hole.

As they were warming their hands at the dying embers of the double fire outside the undertaker's that night, it began to snow. Before it was over, it snowed five inches.

1917

The captain walked by the *No Smooching* sign in the park on his way to talk to a local store owner about the third break-in in a month. The first two times the man had complained about the lack of police concern, first to Teeheezal, then the mayor.

Last night it had happened again, while Patrolmen Al and Billy had been watching the place.

He was on his way to tell the store owner it was an inside job, and to stare the man down. If the break-ins stopped, it had been the owner himself.

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He passed by a hashhouse with a sign outside that said "Bratwurst and Sauerkraut 15¢." As he watched, the cook, wearing his hat and a knee-length apron, pulled the sign from the easel and replaced it with one that said "Victory cabbage and sausage 15¢."

There was a noise from the alleyway ahead, a bunch of voices "get 'im, get 'im" then out of the alley ran something Teeheezal at first thought was a rat or a rabbit. But it didn't move like either of them, though it was moving as fast as it could.

A group of men and women burst out onto the street with rocks and chunks of wood sailing in front of them, thirty feet behind it. It dodged, then more people came from the other side of the street, and the thing turned to run away downtown. The crowd caught up with it. There was a single yelp, then the thudding sounds of bricks hitting something soft. Twenty people stood over it, their arms moving. Then they stopped and cleared off the street and into the alleyways on either side without a word from anyone.

Teeheezal walked up to the pile of wood and stones with the rivulet of blood coming out from under it.

The captain knew the people to whom the dachshund had belonged, so he put it in a borrowed toe sack, and took that and put it on their porch with a note. *Sorry. Cpt. T.*

When he got within sight of the station-house, Patrolman Chester came running out. "Captain! Captain!" he yelled.

"I know," said Teeheezal. "We're at war with Germany."

A month later another postcard arrived. It had a view of the Flatiron Building in New York City, had a Newark, New Jersey postmark, and the usual address. On the left back it said:

—Well, went to the first Sunday baseball game at the Polo Grounds. New York's Finest would have made you proud. They stood at attention at the national anthem then waited for the first pitch before they arrested McGraw and Mathewson for the Blue Law violation. You can imagine what happened next. My credo is—when it comes to a choice between religion and baseball, baseball wins every time. Last time I go to a ball game until they find some way to play it at night. Ha ha. Will write more later.

—Angus

PS: Sorry about Buffalo Bill.

1918

If every rumor were true, the Huns would be in the White House by now. Teeheezal had just seen a government motion picture (before the

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regular one) about how to spot the Kaiser in case he was in the neighborhood spreading panic stories or putting cholera germs in your reservoir.

Now, last night, one had spread through the whole California coast about a U-boat landing. Everybody was sure it had happened at San Pedro, or Long Beach, or maybe it was in Santa Barbara, or along the Sur River, or somewhere. And somebody's cousin or uncle or friend had seen it happen, but when the Army got there there wasn't a trace.

The blotter had fourteen calls noted. One of them reminded the Wilcox police that the president himself was coming to Denver, Colorado, for a speech—coincidence, or what?

"I'm tired of war and the rumors of war," said Teeheezal.

"Well, people out here feel pretty helpless, watching what's going on ten thousand miles away. They got to contribute to the war effort *somehows*," said walrus-mustached Patrolman Billy.

Innocently enough, Patrolmen Mack and Rube decided to swing down by the railroad yards on their way in from patrol. It wasn't on their beat that night, but Sgt. Fatty had told them he'd seen some fat rabbits down there last week, and, tomorrow being their days off, they were going to check it over before buying new slingshots.

The patrol wagon careened by, men hanging on for dear life, picked up Teeheezal from his front yard, and roared off toward the railroad tracks.

The three German sailors went down in a typhoon of shotgun fire and hardly slowed them down at all.

What they did have trouble with was the giant lowland gorilla in the spiked *pickelhaube* helmet, and the eight foot high iron automaton with the letter Q stenciled across its chest.

The Federal men were all over the place. In the demolished railyard were two huge boxes marked for delivery to the Brown Palace in Denver.

"Good work, Captain Teeheezal," said the Secret Service man. "How'd you get the lowdown on this?"

"Ask the two patrolmen," he said.

At the same time, Mack and Rube said "Dogged, unrelenting police procedures."

The postcard came later than usual that year, after the Armistice. It was a plain card, one side for the address, the other for the message.

—Well here in Rekjavik things are really hopping. Today they became an independent nation, and the firewater's flowing like the geysers. It's going to be a three-day blind drunk for all I can figure. Tell

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Sgt. Fatty the fish are all as long as your leg here. Pretty neat country; not as cold as the name. Last time I come to a place where nobody's at work for a week. Will write more later.

—Angus

PS: read they're giving women over 30 in Britain the vote—can we far behind. Ha ha.

PPS: I seem to have a touch of the 'flu.

1919

Sgt. Hank didn't look up from the big thick book in his hand when Teeheezal came out of his office and walked over and poured himself a cup of steaming coffee. Say whatever else about the Peace mess in Europe, it was good to be off rationing again. Teeheezal's nephew had actually brought home some butter and steaks from a regular grocery store and butcher's last week.

"What's Wilson stepping in today?"

No answer.

"Hey!"

"Huh?! Oh, gosh, Chief. Was all wrapped up in this book. What'd you say?"

"Asking about the president. Seen the paper?"

"It's here somewhere," said Sgt. Hank. "Sorry, Chief, but this is about the greatest book I ever read."

"Damn thick square thing," said Teeheezal. He looked closely at a page. "Hey, that's a kraut book!"

"Austria. Well, yeah, it's by a German, but not like any German you ever thought of."

Teeheezal tried to read it, from what he remembered of when he went to school in Pennsylvania fifty years ago. It was full of two-dollar words, the sentences were a mile long, and the verb was way down at the bottom of the page.

"This don't make a goddam bit of sense," he said. "This guy must be a college perfesser."

"It's got a cumulative effect," said Sgt. Hank. "It's about the rise of cultures and civilizations, and how Third Century B.C. China's just like France under Napoleon, and how all civilizations grow and get strong, and wither and die. Just like a plant or an animal, like they're alive, themselves. And how when the civilization gets around to being an empire it's already too late, and they all end up with Caesars and Emperors and suchlike. Gosh, chief, you can't imagine. I've read it twice already, and every time I get more and more out of it. . . ."

"Where'd you get a book like that?"

"My cousin's a reporter at the Peace Commission conference—some-

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body told him about it, and he got one sent to me, thought it'd be something I like. I hear it's already out of print, and the guy's rewriting it."

"What else does this prof say?"

"Well, gee. A lot. Like I said, that all civilizations are more alike than not. That everything ends up in winter, like, after a spring and summer and fall." He pointed to the Cole picture on the wall—today it was *The Pastoral State*. "Like, like the pictures. Only a lot deeper. He says for instance, that Europe's time is over—"

"It don't take a goddammed genius to know that," said Teeheezal.

"No—you don't understand. He started writing this in 1911, it says. He already knew it was heading for the big blooie. He says that Europe's turn's over, being top dog. Now it's the turn of America . . . and . . . and Russia."

Teeheezal stared at the sergeant.

"We just fought a fuckin' war to get rid of ideas like that," he said. "How much is a book like that worth, you think?"

"Why, it's priceless, Chief. There aren't any more of them. And it's full of great ideas!"

Teeheezal reached in his pocket and took out a twenty-dollar gold piece (six weeks of Sgt. Hank's pay) and put it on the sergeant's desk.

He picked up the big book by one corner of the cover, walked over, lifted the stovelid with the handle, and tossed the book in.

"We just settled Germany's hash," said Teeheezal. "It comes to it, we'll settle Russia's too."

He picked up the sports section and went into his office and closed the door.

Sgt. Hank sat with his mouth open. He looked back and forth from the gold piece to the stove to the picture to Teeheezal's door.

He was still doing that when Patrolmen Rube and Buster brought in someone on a charge of drunk and disorderly.

1920

Captain Teeheezal turned his Model T across the oncoming traffic at the corner of Conklin and Arbuckle. He ignored the horns and sound of brakes and pulled into his parking place in front of the station-house.

A shadow swept across the hood of his car, then another. He looked up and out. Two condors flew against the pink southwest sky where the orange ball of the sun was ready to set.

Sgt. Fatty was just coming into view down the street, carrying his big supper basket, ready to take over the night shift.

Captain Teeheezal had been at a meeting with the new mayor about all the changes that were coming when Wilcox was incorporated as a city.

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Sgt. Hank came running out, waving a telegram. "This just came for you."

Teeheezal tore open the Western Union envelope.

TO: ALL POLICE DEPARTMENTS, ALL CITIES, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FROM: OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

1. VOLSTEAD ACT (PROHIBITION) IS NOW LAW STOP ALL POLICE DEPARTMENTS EXPECTED TO ENFORCE COMPLIANCE STOP

2. ROUND UP ALL THE REDS STOP

PALMER

Teeheezal and the sergeant raced to punch the big red button on the sergeant's desk near the three phones. Bells went off in the squad room in the tower atop the station. Sgt. Fatty's lunch basket was on the sidewalk out front when they got back outside. He reappeared from around back, driving the black box of a truck marked Police Patrol, driving with one hand and cranking the hand siren with the other, until Sgt. Hank jumped in beside him and began working the siren on the passenger side.

Patrolmen came from everywhere, the squad room, the garage, running down the streets, their nightsticks in their hands—Al, Mack, Buster, Chester, Billy and Rube—and jumped onto the back of the truck, some missing, grabbing the back fender and being dragged until they righted themselves and climbed up with their fellows.

Teeheezal stood on the running board, nearly falling off as they hit the curb at the park across the street, where the benches had a *No Petting* sign above them.

"Head for the dago part of town," said Teeheezal, taking his belt and holster through the window from Sgt. Hank. "Here," he said to the sergeant, knocking his hand away from the siren crank. "Lemme do that!"

The world was a high screaming whine, and a blur of speed and nightsticks in motion when there was a job to be done. ●

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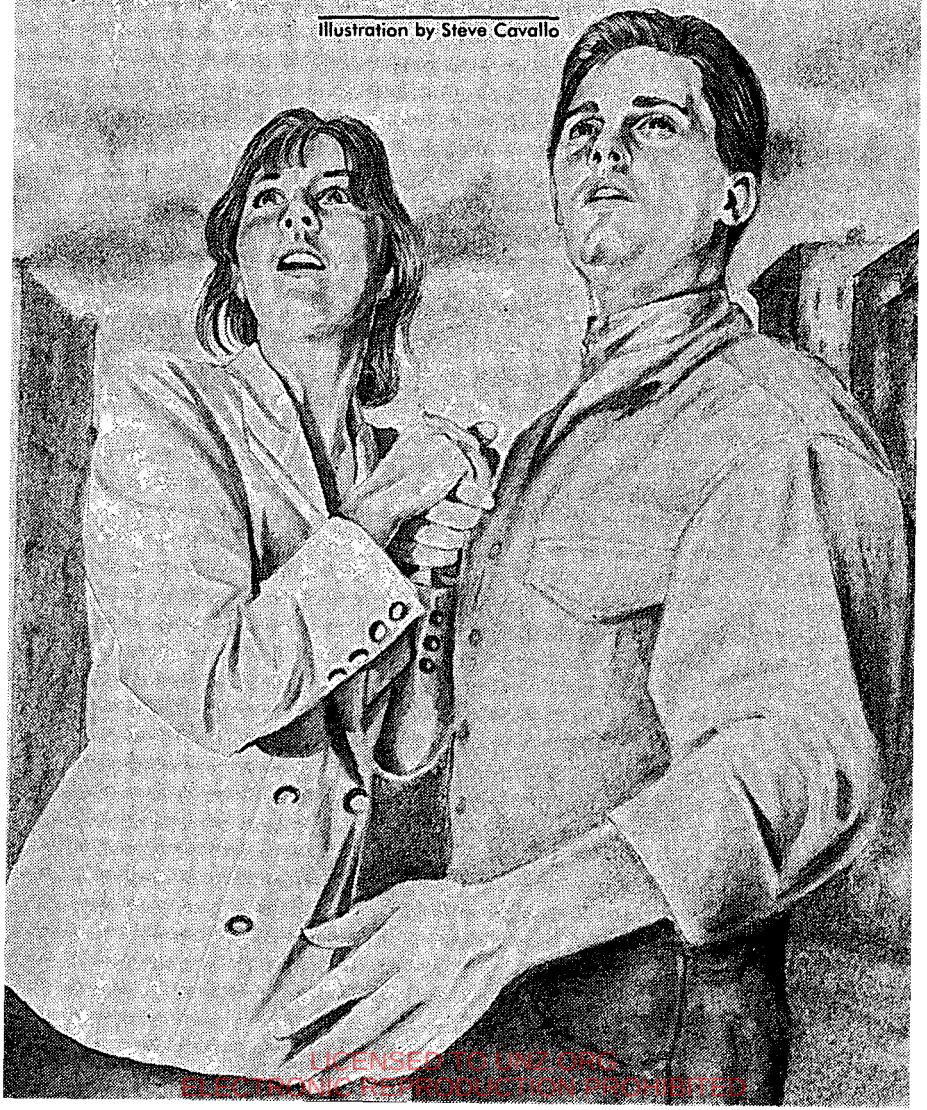
Geoffrey A. Landis

Hugo- and Nebula-award-winner Geoffrey A. Landis takes a wistful look at . . .

THE LAST SUNSET

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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Like an enemy fighter in an old movie about flying aces, the comet came out of the sun, invisible against the glare until it was far too late. There was nothing left to do, Christopher thought, but wait for the inevitable impact, and to calculate where it would hit.

Chris was the astronomy group's pet computer whiz. The comet had been discovered by the astronomers, but the calculation of orbit, and hence finding the time and location of the impact, was his responsibility. He'd been extraordinarily careful with the calculation, checking the critical lunar perturbation by three different methods before he was confident of the results. It was close, almost a miss. Had the Earth been ten minutes further along its orbit, it *would* have been a miss.

It was a hit.

"Shit," said Martin, one of the astronomers. They were gathered in the computer division's conference room, not that the results couldn't have been printed out in any one of their offices. "Forty miles? The impact is forty miles east of here? You're sure?"

Christopher nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Huh? Not your fault," the astronomer said. "What irony. We'll be at ground zero, then, or just about. The fireball will be a hundred miles across. We won't even see it."

"No consolation," said Tibor, the second astronomer on the team, "but, if it matters to you, yes, we'll see it. It will take about a minute for the fireball to expand."

"I'm sorry," said the first astronomer. "I really wanted to see my kids grow up. I did." He was crying now, awkwardly. "Not that it makes any difference what I wanted. I'm sorry. I'm going home now. I think I want to be with my family."

Tibor looked at his watch. "Go ahead and call the newspapers, if you want."

"Why bother?" Martin said, already halfway out the door. "I don't see much point in it."

Tibor tossed the page of printout on the floor. "Yeah. Guess I'm going to go home, too." He looked up at Christopher. "You know, you're lucky," he said, shaking his head. "You're not married. Never thought I'd envy somebody for that."

"Some luck," Christopher said softly, but by then the astronomers had both left, and he was alone in the bright silence of the conference room.

An hour and a half to the end of the world. There was no sense running, Christopher knew. When the end of the world falls like the sword of God out of the sky, there was no place far enough to run. He walked back to his office and stared at the books and papers piled helter-skelter across his desk. They didn't matter. Nothing mattered now; nothing at all.

He closed the door.

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Kara was in her office two doors down, reading a journal. She was the newest hire in the University Research Institute's computer division—she'd been there only a year—but of all the group, he liked working with her best. Occasionally they went out for coffee together; once they'd gone to a movie.

She looked up when he passed her door. "Say, Chris, where is the astronomy group off to?" she asked. "I was just looking for Tibor, but he's not here, and his car's not in the lot."

"He went home early today," Chris said. "So did Martin."

"Oh," Kara said. "No big deal. Guess I'll have to catch him tomorrow." She went back to her reading.

Christopher worked well with her, but sometimes he thought he didn't really know her. Kara was four years younger than he was, and at times the difference seemed like an abyss. Sometimes it seemed to him that she was gently flirting with him, and then a moment later she would be nothing but business, friendly and casual in a completely professional way. She was smart and extremely competent; he never had to explain anything to her twice. He liked working with her.

She was a bit shy, he knew, although she hid it well. One time he'd seen Kara with her kid sister, and the difference had been striking. She'd been simultaneously more grown up, and also younger, laughing and kidding. That day, he thought, was probably when he'd fallen in love with her. He'd known better than to try to make a pass at somebody he worked with; far too often, that led to disaster.

But he'd thought about it many times over the last year. And now, he thought, he could do it now. Now that nothing mattered.

"Hey, Kara," he said, and waited for her to look up again. "Coffee?"

She looked at her watch. "Well—"

"Come on," he said. "You need the break. It's after four."

She looked at the stack of papers on her desk, a bit neater than the piles on his, but still formidable. "Thanks, but I can't. I've really got a lot of work."

"Oh, come on. If it was the end of the world, would any of this really matter?"

She smiled. "Well, okay. Give me five minutes."

It was more like twenty minutes before she came by his office. Chris spent the time writing names on a list of people he ought to call, then crossing them off again.

They went down Thayer Street, to a coffee shop popular with undergraduates, and grabbed a corner table. It had been raining all day, but the sky had finally cleared, and the late afternoon sun glinted in the puddles. Chris's stomach was wound tight. He had to say something now, but he couldn't find words. He felt like he was in high school again, dry-mouthed at the thought of asking a girl to dance. And, indeed, what could

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he say? He realized that he didn't want to threaten their friendship with a pass, and suddenly knew that he wasn't going to ask her anything. It would be too crude. He wanted her to like him too much. He felt like a fool. It was the end of the world, and even so, he was tongue-tied. Nothing could change him.

Kara didn't seem to notice his silence. Perhaps she had things on her mind, too. He didn't even know if she had a boyfriend. She never mentioned one, but why should she? There was so much he didn't know about her; so much he would never get a chance to know.

Christopher turned away, pretending to watch the sunset reflected in the puddles, and worked hard to blink away his tears. Two minutes left. When he thought he could speak without his voice breaking, he said, "Say, grab your coffee, and let's go sit by the observatory to watch the sunset."

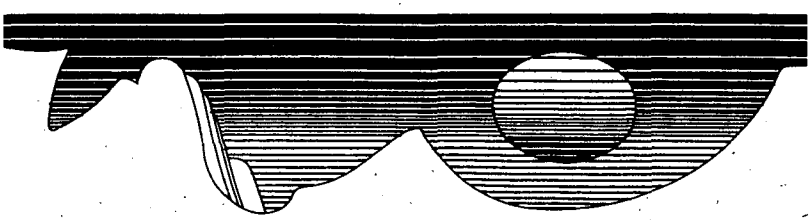
Kara shrugged. "Okay."

Walking down the street, on a sudden impulse he reached out and took her hand. She gave him a sidelong glance, but didn't pull her hand away. Her hand was cool, her fingers surprisingly small against his palm. It was enough, he decided, enough just to walk down the street with her and hold her hand on the last night of the world. It was not what he wanted; he wanted to hold her close to him, to spend his life with her, to share all her secrets and her joys. But holding hands was enough. It was a promise; a promise meant for a someday that, now, would never be. Holding her hand would have to be enough for a lifetime.

Opposite the sunset, a deep red glow was rising silently into the sky, backlighting the clouds low on the horizon. "Look," he said, and she turned around and stopped, her eyes brilliant in the glow.

"Why, it's beautiful," she said. "I've never seen a sunset do that before. What is it?"

The red stretched nearly from horizon to horizon now, and in the east it was turning an intense blue-violet, brighter than the sun. "It's the end of the world," he said, and then, at last, there was nothing left to say. ●



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Mary Rosenblum

GAS FISH

Mary Rosenblum tells us she is "intrigued by the legal issues that loom on the horizon. As our biological and electronic technologies expand, who will own what?" A hardcover collection of her short fiction, *Synthesis and Other Virtual Realities*, is just out from Arkham House, and she is working on a mainstream mystery.

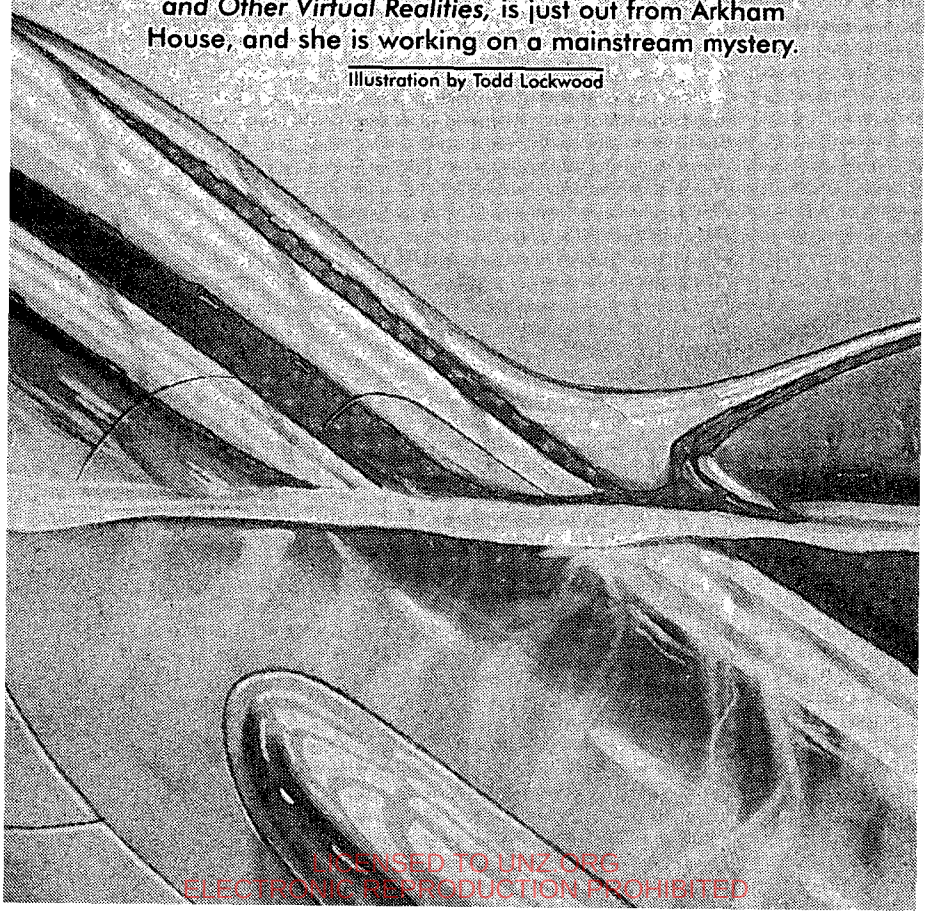

Illustration by Todd Lockwood

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"Actually, I am glad that you decided to investigate us." Jovan's director, Sandra Li, was trying hard to be polite. "Considering your reputation, Mr. Kraj, a clean bill of health from you should be worth quite a bit."

"You make me sound like a witch hunter." Anton smiled. "I only report facts."

"The facts can be slanted to suggest fallacies."

"That's so." Anton refused to be annoyed. "You could say that I report the truth rather than facts. The truth is not always factual." He turned away to lean his elbows on the deck rail, sweeping the cluster of beach houses and the dock below with a long slow stare. The microcameras mounted on his headband rig were synched to a tiny implant on his eyelid. Online participants would see what he saw—neat cottages and pristine white sand dotted with a few beach towels and sunbathers.

He had taken Elliot to a diving resort every summer—a small private place on a cove like this one. During that last horrible year, he had paid to have the hospital run scuba virtuals designed for the paralyzed. So that Elliot could dive as much as he wanted. Anton unclenched his teeth. "Your research facility has all the ambiance of an upscale resort," he said mildly.

"This *was* a resort." Li flushed. "You're too well informed not to know that the property was donated to Jovan Corporation. Or have you already condemned us, Mr. Kraj?"

"Why should I condemn you? Call me Anton," he said as she turned away without speaking. Her reserve had finally cracked. Pleased, Anton followed her across the deck and down the weathered wooden stairs. Dry facts didn't sell well. Participants wanted drama, emotional displays, enticing visuals. "If your facility is everything you say it is, then you have no worries." He smiled at her. A tip had suggested that Jovan was not on the up and up. He had his top informant working on that hint. Bogus science was big business—and the cost was sometimes . . . human. "My participants are curious about you," he said.

"Participants." Li stopped abruptly and looked back at him. "Your audience does not participate. They only wish to be entertained. That's all that matters." Her gaze focused on his headband. "I suppose you'll use all this?" she asked bitterly.

"If it fits." Anton smiled gently. "Whatever you may wish to believe, Ms. Li, I have never slanted my stories against an innocent party."

"Who appointed *you* judge?" she snapped.

"My son." The words caught him by surprise, and he focused quickly on the blue horizon, panning for stock background. Perhaps it was the sea that brought Elliot back so sharply—they had been diving when the symptoms had manifested. Anton shook his head, angry at himself. Li's narrowed eyes suggested that she had noticed his reaction. "I simply re-

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port the facts," he said harshly. "Why Jupiter? Why should we spend time and lots of money to send a probe into its atmosphere? We can't live there. Mining anything from that hellhole would be impossibly expensive. Why not invest our resources in the Mars terraforming project?"

"I think we are facing a crisis," she said softly. "We must choose whether to spend our precious resources on expanding our current environment or leap into the unknown and deal with what we find there. Perhaps this is a test of evolution. If we cannot evolve, we will be trapped here forever—on Earth, on whatever replicas of Earth we can create on Mars or the orbital platforms. To evolve, we must look beyond ourselves."

"To Jupiter?"

"It's a first step." Her eyes were luminous in the hazy afternoon light. "We may find nothing, but we need to *look*. If we lose that sense of wonder, that burning need to go and find out that has taken us this far—we're through, at a dead end, at . . ." She caught her breath and blushed. "Well, your *participants* should like that bit of melodrama." She leaned her face into a retinal scanner set into the wall beside the door. "We need to move on. I have a meeting at four. The actual Jupiter probe is being constructed in another building. That's our next stop. This is our simulation lab."

Anton followed her into a small antechamber, thinking that he had just caught a glimpse of the real Sandra Li. Idealist, he thought. And naïve. Pale green coveralls hung on the walls above pairs of plastic boots. A second door let them into a cavernous building.

"What exactly do you simulate in here?" he asked. Floor, walls, and ceiling were painted a soft pastel yellow. The rear half of the building was nothing but a large diving pool with ladders at each end, and a squat electric crane. Its boom stuck out over the water. The air was cool and humid, thick with sea smell.

A ten-foot-long, vaguely whale-shaped model stood in the middle of the floor between the diving pool and the entrance. It had blue plastic skin, a thick stubby tail, and two pairs of oversized fins along its sides. Elliot would have been fascinated, Anton thought, and then pushed the thought out of his head. "*That's* your probe?" Anton focused on it, thinking *ugly*. "A big fish?"

"It's a scale model of the probe." Li nodded. "This is where our prototype trains for the conditions he is likely to encounter once he has been deployed. He will be swimming in a gaseous sea of ammoniated water vapor and tremendous turbulence. Fish are excellent models, so we use a combination of virtual simulation and actual subsea training."

"He?" Anton raised his eyebrows.

"A bit of anthropomorphism." Li smiled primly. "We recovered the core of our A.I. system from the first probe, but this time we overlaid it with a simulated human personality shell."

"Your last probe failed rather immediately, didn't it?"

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"We underestimated the extent of the turbulence it encountered." Li scowled at his innocent tone. "We have a much better knowledge of conditions, thanks to the information it sent us. This system is experimental, but so far our tests indicate that the combination is much more successful than an unenhanced A.I. at making fast and effective decisions in unexpected situations of crisis."

"It's a very expensive system," Anton murmured.

"Jonah is very creative."

"Jonah?" Anton studied the whale-shape for his participants. "Pun intended, right? Is this him?"

"*I'm* him." A boyish tenor came from the direction of the empty pool. "But yeah, I guess you could say I got swallowed by a whale. Or a robot tuna, anyway." There was a grin to his tone.

That voice raised the hairs on Anton's neck. He turned—automatic reflexes making it a slow pan so that he didn't dizzy his participants. That *voice*. . . . A large silvery fish-shape floated in the pool. It looked something like the prototype, but smaller and a bit more streamlined.

"Jonah, this is Mr. Kraj." Li smiled at the fish. "How did the tests go?"

"Fine, of course. You're Kraj, the docu-dramatist?" The voice brightened. "Cool! I always wanted to be famous. You wanted publicity, right Sandy? You got the biggest."

"Publicity," Li muttered under her breath. "Not a trial."

Coincidence, Anton told himself numbly. He was hearing something that wasn't there. "You . . . you're using a child's personality to operate a million-dollar probe?"

"I'm no kid. What's your problem, mister?" The silvery fish rose in the water to point a blunt, blind snout at Anton. "You think I can't do it? You ought to see how I handle an updraft storm!"

"Jonah, easy." Li sounded grimly amused. "He doesn't know how good you are."

Elliot's voice. The fish was speaking with Elliot's voice. Anton clung to the mask of a professional smile. Pitch, syntax, word choice—all *Elliot. You think I can't do it?* Elliot had said that once—those very words. On their first deep dive together.

Coincidence, Anton told himself. Elliot was dead. Elliot had been dead for nearly a decade—long enough for Anton to forget, to remember wrong.

Bullshit, all of the above. Except for the stark truth of his son's death.

"Mr. Kraj?" Li touched his elbow. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Anton blinked. "Nothing." He had been staring at a blank patch of wall, like an amateur—so much for using this bit of visual. "I . . . I apologize." *Endit,* he subvocalized, instructing his biointerface to turn off record mode. Only then did he force himself to look at the mechanical fish. "I'm sure that you're very good," he said. "Perhaps you can talk to

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me some more." Although he didn't want to hear his son's voice coming from this . . . artifact. But why would they program evasion into their A.I.? This . . . thing might spill facts that Li and her bunch would not.

"I don't know if I want to talk to you," the fish said sullenly. It submerged, slopping a foamy wave of seawater across the floor. Anton looked down at his soaked shoes.

"You offended him." Li raised an eyebrow at him. "We left the personality shell reasonably intact, so Jonah can be as touchy as any thirteen-year-old—even if he isn't driven by hormones. His current body is similar to his Jovian form." She nodded at the obese whale on its stand. "He practices in the water, and he practices with his Jovian form, hooked into virtual simulations via a direct bio-interface."

"Why thirteen?" Anton blurted. "And where did you get that personality?"

"Humans are least concerned by their mortality at that age," Li said. "They are at their peak of creativity and curiosity." She eyed him warily. "Jonah is easily the most expensive component of our Jovian fish. But Jupiter is unpredictable. We hope to avoid the accident that claimed our first probe."

"Who was the donor for the personality construct?" Anton asked again. He had said *was,* as if the donor was dead.

"That's confidential. I doubt it's even on file." The wariness on Li's face deepened and she glanced pointedly at her watch. "I'm late for my meeting. I have instructed our medical staff to implant you with an ID chip." She didn't sound pleased. "It will permit you to wander around the facility as you will. Our staff will answer any and all of your questions. Our only requirement, of course, is that you not record any developmental specifics."

"I'd like to talk to Jonah," Anton said, but she was already walking briskly back up the path toward the main building. He should have pursued the subject of Jovan's funding. Anton scowled, annoyed at himself. He had let himself be distracted.

The fish had spoken in Elliot's voice.

"Excuse me, sir." A coveralled young man tapped Anton on the shoulder, startling him from his reverie. "If you'll come with me, I'll escort you to the clinic. They'll give you your ID chip there."

The technician's timing suggested that they had very good security here. The video eyes were well hidden. "Fine." He smiled pleasantly at his escort. Cooperation won't buy you anything, he thought silently. If you are a scam, I will expose you to the world.

"This won't hurt a bit," the clinic doctor told Anton. It was the usual lie, but the implantation didn't hurt much. Afterward, the doctor sprayed a liquid bandage over the implantation site and sent Anton on his way. He didn't look particularly happy about doing the implant.

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This was a very close-knit little company, Anton decided. Nobody really wanted him sniffing around. Which was typical, but this bunch was acting just a bit too helpful. As Anton left the clinic, he wondered what they might be hiding behind that pretense of goodwill.

Tech stocks were hot investments on the world stock exchange—volatile and potentially big money-makers. They were almost as volatile as the entertainment industry's stocks. Which prompted a lot of speculative research. And prompted some unscrupulous companies to suppress data that might compromise a promising new product. The penalties were high for that kind of scam, but so were the potential profits if everything turned out all right. Anton rubbed the implant site on his shoulder as he climbed into the cab waiting for him at Jovan's main gate. To his surprise, the cab was driven by a real person.

"Where to?" the freckled girl behind the wheel asked.

Anton gave her the address and leaned back as the cab pulled away from the gate. Was that Li watching from the shadow of the gate house? He peered through the rear window, but whoever it was had vanished. Frowning, he scratched the implantation site again.

"You just get a shot?" the cabby asked.

"No."

"I hate shots. All those vaccinations. I think they're just a gimmick, you know?" She negotiated a hairpin turn at breathtaking speed. "Just another hook to snag our money. Scare tactics. Me, I haven't done one since I was a kid, and I'm healthy."

"Good for you." Anton sighed.

"Look at that plague that came out of South America—the one that was gonna kill off the world. They did a vaccine for that, and people got sick anyway."

"That was because the vaccine was shit." Anton sat up straight on the cheap plastic seat. "The people who made it *knew* it was shit when they marketed it. They made a lot of money, knowing it."

"Jeeze, you don't say?" The woman glanced back over her shoulder, pale brows arching skeptically. "That sucks."

She didn't know? How could she not know? "How old were you eleven years ago?"

"Me?" The cabby shrugged. "Eight. Almost nine."

How soon we forget, Anton thought bitterly. "Do you know how Santorres kills?" He stared at the passing landscape, watching the protected wetland transform slowly into urban sprawl. "It doesn't. It temporarily paralyzes the muscles that let you breathe and make your heart beat. If your family can afford to keep you on total life support for a year or so, and if you don't die from some kind of secondary infection, you'll be fine. Fed Med doesn't cover that kind of treatment."

"So you gotta go to a private hospital? You'd have to be rich." The cab-

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by shook her head. "Man, that would be an ugly choice. Go broke or save your brother, or kid, or whoever. Whatever happened to the creeps who made the bad vaccine anyway? I bet they lived happily ever after."

"It *was* an ugly choice," Anton said very very softly. "And the people responsible got the death penalty. Every one of them."

The cabby looked at him, then turned quickly back to the road. And shivered. She didn't say anything more. Silently, she pulled up to let him out at the edge of the plaza where his building was located.

"I went to Belize at the beginning of the pandemic. To do a docu-drama on it. I was doing straight news then." Anton leaned down to zip his card through the cab's reader. "My-thirteen-year-old son went with me. We were both vaccinated." He added a generous tip and pocketed his card. "I watched the execution of the company's top executive." He paused for a long moment, then added, "Have a nice day."

The cab zoomed off as he walked slowly across the plaza. It was sunny, but he shivered, as if invisible clouds had blocked the sun. Yesterday, he thought as he rubbed the insertion site again. Bad stuff. Don't think about it. Think about Li instead. Think about why she had given him the chip when she clearly didn't want to. And think about who had ordered her to do it. That *who* would be important.

The sun had sunk below the city skyline, but golden light still seeped between the towers, turning the massed blooms on a flower vendor's cart into a riot of glowing colors. Anton paused to buy a handful of lilies on his way to the tower where he had short-leased an apartment.

The dozen or so public screens mounted on walls along the edges of the plaza displayed a kaleidoscope of image-bites as a dozen different online purveyors offered entertainment, or news—which was even more entertaining because it was real. More or less, Anton thought sourly. Reality was a matter of interpretation—Li was right. Hidden cameras beneath the screens monitored eye-track points—the more people who looked at a screen, the more viewer-hours of attention a company amassed, increasing their ratings. High ratings sent their stock up on the international exchange. A media company's value could fluctuate dramatically during the course of a single program day. A good media artist could increase a company's value enormously.

Which was why everyone wanted *him,* Anton Kraj—one-man ratings booster. Which would only be true until he bored his participants, Anton thought bitterly. Oh, he could tell himself that he presented the truth and the truth alone, but he presented it to his participants' tastes.

If Jovan was an innocent research firm, he wouldn't waste a single minute designing a special about it. That wasn't what his participants wanted. They wanted guilt. Collusion. Maybe a whiff of decaying bodies, buried in some landfill. *Entertainment,* Li's voice echoed in his head.

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Truth, he countered. Entertaining truth, yeah, but truth nonetheless. He smiled crookedly as he let himself into the tower lobby. He needed to review the day's takes of the Jovan site, edit them a bit, and archive them. Mostly they would provide stock that could be edited into later takes, when he needed to segue from one scene to another. The elevator let him out on his floor. One wall of the hallway was transparent, so that he could look down into the tower's garden core. It had been landscaped as a rain forest. He paused for a moment, remembering the rain forest preserve he had visited with Elliot, on their Belize trip. A child ran down the path below, and for a heart-stopping instant he saw Elliot in the slight, dark-haired figure. And wished briefly that he'd rented in a tower with a different landscaping motif.

"Hello, neighbor."

Anton jumped, and turned around. The slight, sandy-haired man smiling and holding out his hand looked vaguely familiar. "Hello," Anton said warily.

"I saw you moving in." The small man nodded. "I live next door—just wanted to say hi. I'm Cam."

"Anton. Come in," Anton said, suddenly grateful for company—any company. "Can I get you a drink? I've got beer. Nothing more sophisticated, I'm afraid."

"Thanks." Cam followed him into the room, glancing around curiously.

There wasn't much to see. Generic leased furniture, his studio hardware in one corner. Anton poured beer into two glasses and put the lilies into a third glass, because the leased dishes didn't include a vase. When he turned around with the beers, he found Cam standing at his workstation, staring at the single holo of Elliot that Anton had kept.

"Your kid?" he asked as Anton handed the beer. "He looks like you."

"Yeah, I guess he does." Elliot hadn't inherited much from his mother—as if their pre-conception custody agreement had prejudiced their gametes. Regretting his invitation, Anton stripped off his headband, detached it from the virtual skinthins he wore beneath his clothes, and tossed it onto the workstation.

"You're in media?" Cam's eyes lighted up. "Advertising?"

"News." Anton shoved the holo back behind the solid cube of his hard-data safe, extracted the day's data-sphere from his skinthins, and socketed it into the unit. He'd archive it into his Net studio later. "Docudrama."

"News? You're kidding?" Cam leaned forward eagerly. "Wait a minute . . . You're not Anton Kraj? Kraj the Shark? Yeah, sure you are. I saw an interview with you once." He slapped his knee and laughed with delight. "You're the best. You sure go for the jugular. Blood everywhere."

"Thanks." The praise felt sour, and Anton had a sudden image of San-

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dra Li's luminous face as she talked about evolution and Jupiter. You have to know, he told her silently. You cannot be innocent.

"So who are you investigating this time?"

"Jovan Corporation." Never underestimate the value of gossip. "They're launching another Jupiter probe."

"Space exploration!" Cam scowled and swallowed beer. "We can barely feed ourselves as it is. We need to concentrate on the Mars terraform, not throw precious resources away on exploration that doesn't get us anything useful."

"Maybe you're right." Anton shrugged, and sipped at his own beer. Cam's tirade had had an artificial feel to it—as if he was trying to elicit a response from Anton instead of airing his genuine feelings. He'd used the same trick often enough in his own interviews. "So what do you do?" he asked, to change the subject.

"I'm with InfoSearch. If it's on the Net, we can find it," Cam quoted theatrically. "And we *can*. Legal or not, but I didn't say that." He finished his beer. "Let me know if you ever need any research. I'll give you a professional discount." He gave Anton a crooked smile. "Stop in anytime," he said. "I owe you a beer."

"Maybe I will." Anton followed Cam to the door, glad that he was leaving. Yeah, he was lonely, he told himself as the door locked behind Cam. But the whole episode had the same unnatural feel as Cam's tirade. As if his neighbor had *wanted* to make contact with him. And he had certainly seen Cam somewhere before.

Anton shrugged, and sat down at his workstation. Time to go through the day's takes and separate stock visuals from the good bits. He popped the datasphere from his hard-memory safe into his Net terminal. Some bits of his conversation with Li might be worth editing into a bite. For the next two hours, he chopped her words and images into chunks and then reassembled them into a seamless and passionate monologue about evolving humanity and Jupiter. Then he overlaid the whole with a good synthesizer track and a subtle background of waves breaking. It was what she had said—only more so. Anton ran it again, frowning. Framed by an exposé, her words would sound utterly hypocritical. It would be a damning and potent segment.

Would she ever dare to believe in anything that strongly again? Anton shook his head angrily; that was not his problem, and this kind of speculation had never troubled him before. His joints popped as he stretched, and his stomach reminded him fiercely that dinner was overdue. Sandra Li had made her choices and her compromises, whether she believed in what she said or not. She'd have to deal with the price.

Go eat, he told himself. Or finish your beer, have another, and go to bed. Instead, he found himself calling up the segment of the day's take where the mechanical fish poked its snout out of the diving pool.

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A Fed Med clinic stood on nearly every corner. The government guaranteed basic health care to everyone. If you wanted treatment that went beyond basic care, you went to a private hospital. Maintaining a victim of the Santorres virus for the required year or more was not included in basic coverage. The only way to pay off the life-support bill after Elliot's death had been to sell any of Elliot's tissues, organs, or test results that were marketable. The hospital had provided the counseling and the contract. Organs. Tests. Nothing else.

Anton sat at his workstation until the early hours of the morning, listening to a mechanical fish speak with his son's voice.

"Everybody's at the meeting." Jonah's voice startled Anton as he prowled through the eerie and empty boat house. "The place is dead."

"I wouldn't say that." Anton lifted his head to stare at the video eye he had located on one of the rafters. "I bet Security isn't at the meeting."

"Oh. Well." Jonah's tone suggested a shrug. "She's scared of you. Sandy." Thoughtful tone, now. "How come?"

"What makes you think she's scared of me?" Anton looked at him finally, found himself unnerved by that eyeless silver snout. He did not want to be talking to this . . . thing. "How do you see without eyes?"

"She planted you with a chip and she didn't want to." Lying still in the water, Jonah elevated his tail slowly, so that water sheeted down the big flukes and dripped off with the sound of rain falling. "As for eyes—I can see in spectra you don't even know exist. Who needs eyes?"

"You're right about her being scared," Anton said. A.I., he thought. Would Elliot have inferred this much? Yes, he decided. Elliot had been so smart. The old grief seized him in its claws. "So, who told her to open all the doors for me?" he asked harshly.

"Guess."

"The Web corporations that are putting up the money." Anton forced a smile. "It's a very good idea to be nice to me."

"Why?" Jonah sounded curious. "I watched all your stuff, you know. You're not like a lot of people who do news stories. You don't make it up. You just take boring stuff about stupid greedy people and make it sound a lot more exciting than it is."

"Gee, thanks," Anton murmured.

"We're not faking anything."

Watch, he'd said, not *participate.* The second choice was the idiom of the day. Interesting. "If you're not faking anything, then Ms. Li has nothing to be afraid of." He walked over to the edge of the pool and sat down. "So, tell me about yourself."

"Me?" Jonah had sunk to his dorsal fin in the water. Now he bobbed slowly up and down so that thick, sluggish waves slopped against the rim of the pool. "Why me?"

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"Because you're the most interesting person in the place." Anton pulled off his boots, rolled up his pants, and stuck his feet into the cool water. "How cold is Jupiter going to be?"

"Where I'm going to swim, you mean?" Jonah's voice brightened. "It's pretty warm—about ten degrees centigrade. There's water—although it's ammoniated. Stuff could live there. Bacteria. Maybe more complex stuff." He paused, and Anton heard evasion in that silence.

"Your first probe didn't find any evidence of life," he said carefully.

"Did your homework, huh?" Another pause. "It . . . didn't, but we did some computer extrapolations. From some fragments of data that the probe sent back just before it was . . . destroyed. It could all be wrong."

This was the tone Elliot had used when he didn't want to lie, but didn't want to admit something either. "What kind of extrapolations?" Anton drew a slow breath. "If you tell me, I won't put what you say online."

Jonah was silent for a moment. "We're just making it all up," he said at last.

His caution reminded Anton of Li's tone the day before. What weren't they telling, here? Anton leaned back, so that Jonah's sleek silvery body was entirely in his vision-field. "What destroyed the first probe?"

"Turbulence," Jonah said calmly. "They don't really figure that I'll last all that long. But I'm going to surprise them." He slopped another wave across Anton's wet pants. "I'm *good*. I'm better than they think—even Sandy." Pride hummed in his words, banishing all sense of evasion. "You just wait. I'll show them everything."

"I bet you will," Anton said and thought, I can't stand this. He turned off the recording feature. "I had a son once." He looked into that eyeless face. "You would have liked him." Face it, he thought bitterly. Face how you feel about this . . . kid. A.I. Space probe. Whatever the hell it is.

"You talk like he's dead." Jonah lay still in the water.

"Yes." Anton exhaled, moving his feet slowly in the cool water. "He caught Santorres."

"I'm sorry. There's a good vaccine for it now."

"I know." Anton felt a sudden pressure against his slowly numbing feet. Jonah had nudged him gently. Anton reached down and laid a hand on his wet cold back. To his surprise, the silvery material gave slightly beneath his palm. "You remind me of Elliot," he said. There. Out loud now. Face it.

For several moments, Jonah was silent, then he lifted his blind fish head from the water. "Maybe I could show you where I'm going to go," he said.

"I'd . . . like that." Anton blinked as a red star began to pulse in the upper right corner of his vision field. Urgent relay from one of his sources. "Accept," he murmured.

"You owe me." A black-sun icon flashed against the backdrop of the div-

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ing pool. It was The Rev—the most talented of his hacker-informants. "I made the Jovan thing solid for you," The Rev's voice whispered over Anton's implant. "Their money goes through a bunch of small intermediary firms in the Web, but I nailed the source. I dumped it into your secure filespace." He chuckled. "I *scored,* man."

"The punch line?" Anton murmured. "Whose money is it?"

"Europa AM. They need to lose a little cash this year. Temporarily, anyway. Hey—you work for WorldNews. Their stock is down on the Exchange. You gonna rescue them with this Jovan thing?"

"Don't I always," Anton drawled.

"Tough shit for Jovan, huh?"

"They're a scam," Anton said, but The Rev's icon had already vanished.

So Europa AM was using Jovan as a money-sink. A huge and powerful corporation with tentacles woven all through the economic Web, they were surely recouping that money as it surfaced elsewhere—all nice and clean now. All it would require was a minimum of cooperation from Jovan. And The Rev had dumped proof of that cooperation into Anton's secure file.

"You're wearing a bio-interface," Jonah said.

"Huh?" Anton glanced down, his thoughts scattering. "Yes, I do," he said cautiously.

"Cool." Jonah reared up in the water so that they were on a level. "Nobody here wears one. It's xenophobia. As if you could turn someone into a machine just by doing a direct brain interface!"

Anton smelled sea and a hint of something else. Ozone? Plastic?

"It makes you more like me." Jonah sank slowly and gently back into the water. "I like that," he said, with a grin in his voice. "Quicker, you know? Sandy's interface is *so* clunky. Come on," he said in a conspiratorial tone. "I'll show you Jupiter. I can hack your bio-access in about two seconds, but we've got to hurry. The meeting'll be over soon. I'll meet you in the sim lab, okay?"

Anton didn't really want to do this. He heard Elliot every time Jonah opened his mouth, and this was not a healthy state of mind. But something was odd here, and he had a feeling that it was connected to those sims. Anton approached the sim lab, wondering if his chip would really open the door for him.

Hoping it would save him? He let his breath out in a rush as the door slid obediently aside. So much for salvation. Suppressing a sigh, he walked into a standard VR cubicle. It had blank white walls—except for the open pool in the center of the room. Jonah was already waiting for him, slopping small impatient wavelets onto the composite floor.

Anton wondered if everyone wore boots around here.

"You got a full bio-face direct-linked into your skins, right?" Jonah

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sounded preoccupied. "Just a minute. I should be able to hack in through our system . . . got you!"

The room shimmered and vanished. Anton staggered as pale buff padding appeared centimeters from his nose. In a burst of claustrophobic reaction, he pushed himself backward, bumped hard into the lab's invisible wall. In virtual, he was lying in a padded, coffin-sized space. Virtual, he reminded himself, it's only virtual, and his spike of panic subsided somewhat. "Where are we?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"In my pod." Jonah's voice came over his implanted com-link. "I don't get released until we're down into the atmosphere. Too much radiation up high. Just relax. You're ghosting me—I'm actually navigating the virtual—you're just along for the ride. So you can't do anything on your own. Here we go!" His voice went boyish and excited again.

The padded womb that held Anton split open suddenly, and an invisible hand propelled him forcefully into bright light. None too soon, he thought grimly, and tried to look back. Nothing happened. Nothing happened when he waved his arms. He let them fall limp to his sides, and simply *looked*. Wisps of white cloud streaked the incredibly blue sky and a sliver of moon hung above the horizon. An Arizona sky, he thought and turned his gaze downward.

No. Not Arizona. Salmon, orange, rose, yellow, and pink clouds formed a twisted landscape of canyons and ridges, twisted into spiraled whorls, pierced here and there by towering mounds of white cloud. The bulbous whale shape he had seen in the boathouse drifted along beside him, fins and tail propelling it with easy grace. Jonah? They were descending rapidly into a shadowed canyon between two spirals of rose-and-salmon colored cloud. "What are they made of?" Anton gasped. "My God!"

"Hydrogen sulfides and ammonia crystals. The white clouds are pure ammonia." Jonah sounded preoccupied. "We've got to watch out for turbulence." The whale veered left, and Anton found himself following.

I'm a fish, he thought. Not an ocean fish but a gas fish. He laughed. "It's *beautiful*. Look—those clouds remind me of thunderstorms." Anton found his view shifting until he was focusing on one of the towering structures that mushroomed up through the pink layer.

"They're not. They're updraft storms that come from way down and can take you up here like a runaway elevator. You can go from 10 degrees centigrade to minus 230 in no time flat. That's why people said life probably hadn't evolved on Jupiter." His voice lowered conspiratorially. "They were wrong."

"Not according to the data your probe sent back."

"Yeah, well, right at the end I . . . *it* . . . sent some more data. The stuff I told you was garbled. The hardware was getting trashed and the . . . probe was dying." He fell briefly silent. "If you really work at it, you can fill in the blanks."

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He sounded defensive, as if he were continuing an argument begun in the past. Life on Jupiter? "How was the first probe lost?" Anton asked absently.

"It came apart in an updraft storm." Jonah's tone was flat and emotionless. "That's what we've got to watch out for. They're not sure that this body could survive a big updraft either."

He *expected* to die here. It hit Anton suddenly and hard that Elliot had had that same expectation from the very beginning. He must have overheard whispered conferences with the doctor. And he knew about Santorres. He had hidden it for a long time. Anton swallowed a lump of pain and looked down, banishing thought with Jupiter's incredible beauty. They had almost reached the hydrogen sulfide clouds. "Is it me, or is it getting a little warmer?" Anton asked.

"It is. The virtual cues your skins to interpret temperature change. If I go too deep, I really get cooked. Where we're going, it's above freezing. It's like this sea—at least compared to what's up here. It's not really liquid, you know, but close enough. I want to . . . show you something." He sounded suddenly shy. "Just to see what you think."

Anton tensed as the first wisps of vapor thickened around them. For a time, he was blind, then the clouds thinned, and he gasped. He was suspended in a misty world beneath a pink-and-rose sky that glowed gently overhead. They were gliding beneath the pink cloud sky, swooping and dipping like sea gulls though a universe of fog. Shapes formed and dissipated in the mist, and Anton wondered if he were seeing them or if his brain were creating them out of the opalescent nothingness. "Look!" Jonah's voice vibrated with excitement. "Over there!"

Anton looked, his vision linked to Jonah's. And saw . . . a shape. It undulated slowly and majestically in the gale-force wind that carried them along, sparkling into visibility as it twisted. Reds, oranges, and opalescent purple glinted on its translucent surface. Anton thought of a giant bed sheet blowing in the wind—an ephemeral bed sheet woven of shimmering translucent threads. Jonah was working his fins and tail like any fish, and they were getting closer to the billowing shape.

"What *is* that?" Anton's eyes widened as he realized just how *big* that sheet was. It seemed to be a lacework of threads—millions of interwoven threads with beads of color at most of the intersections. "This wasn't in your probe's report," he gasped.

"I call it a reef." Jonah laughed, and it was so much Elliot's laugh that Anton clenched his fists. "Other things live in it and on it, just like fish on a reef. You'll see."

The reef was tearing, Anton noticed, shredding continuously in the wind. One piece twisted completely free, fragmenting into rags that fluttered away in the wind. A portion snagged briefly on the main mass. It seemed to stick, and the adjacent threads shimmered. "It's reattaching," Anton breathed.

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"The other pieces might stick to other reefs," Jonah said. "Maybe . . . that's how they exchange information."

"What are they made of?"

"I dunno." Jonah's tone was a grin again. "I'm going to find out, this time. Uh oh." His tone changed. "Incoming!"

In an instant of unsettling disorientation, the mist world vanished. Anton swayed, regained his balance as the white walls of the VR cubicle reappeared around him. "Jupiter is . . . incredible." He looked down at the pool, but the silvery fish shape had already sunk beneath the surface and vanished. "Thanks for taking me," he said softly, still dazed by what he had just witnessed.

"Hey, any time!" Jonah's voice came in over his implant, bright with that note of shared conspiracy again. "I better beat it. I'm supposed to be working through some tests. Nice hardware you got. Later."

"Later," Anton said, and thought, poor lonely kid.

He wasn't a kid. Anton turned to face Sandra Li as she hurried through the door.

"Mr. Kraj." She smiled warily at him. "I'm sorry I was unavailable. I didn't expect you here so early. I hope you weren't bored." She glanced at the pool. "It's boring to watch somebody else doing virtual. Jonah should have loaned you goggles at least."

"He didn't have to." He was curious about her reaction. "I'm better equipped than you might think."

"Lenses? Bio-interface?" A shadow of revulsion flitted across her face. "You're braver than me, to let someone poke around in your brain. I suppose, in your business, it's worth the risk. So." She put a smile back onto her face. "Did he show you *his* Jupiter? Or *ours?*"

"He showed me reefs." He watched her closely for a reaction. "You folks never mentioned them."

"They don't exist." Only a brief tightening of her lips suggested any reaction. "Don't forget that you're dealing with a thirteen-year-old kid, Mr. Kraj. With a child's need to fantasize."

"There are no reefs, then?" He smiled. "I can quote you?"

She shrugged. "The first probe transmitted the entire contents of its memory as it was being destroyed. It was an emergency protocol designed to give us a copy of everything—but the transmission was badly garbled." She finally looked away. "Jonah has spent a lot of time with that data. If you run it through enough enhancement protocols, you can extrapolate almost anything from it. Could you just leave the reefs out of your . . . story?" Above her casual smile, her eyes were anxious. "They're Jonah's fantasy. His version of imaginary friends. That's all."

"So there is no life on Jupiter?" he persisted.

"We . . . can't say that for sure." She flushed. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm not sure," he said, and they smiled at each other politely. "Tell me

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about your funding," he said as she ushered him out of the boat house. "I'm curious."

"Our tax records are in a public-access database." She raised an eyebrow. "What are you really asking me, Mr. Kraj? Can we stop playing games, please?"

"There are some cash-flow brokerages that are . . . shall we say . . . unscrupulous. Fate seems to smile on them. A border war benefits arms sales. A new rice virus causes local famine and boosts commodities prices in one country and ag technology prices in another. They make money. They are a very good investment," he mused. "If you don't mind the cost in human suffering."

"I would like to end this." Li stopped in the middle of the path and faced him. "You are implying that one such *unethical* firm has funded us. I would appreciate it if you would give your vague accusations a name, please."

"Europa AM." He watched her face closely.

"I asked you to end the game." She didn't quite meet his eyes. "You know that we are not funded by Europa." She shrugged and began walking briskly up the main path. "If someone said that we are, then you should find a more reliable source of information. You may tarnish your reputation for being right, Mr. Kraj."

She was lying. "Perhaps." Anton didn't try to keep up with her brisk angry stride. He turned on his recording feature and got a good take of the old resort building emerging from the coastal shrubbery. The swimming pool had been maintained, and a couple of employees were sunning themselves on towels. He could make this place look like a huge luxurious scam with very little editing.

"I'm sorry for losing my temper." She waited for him at the top of the path. "Can I offer you lunch? Our cafeteria is quite good."

"Thanks," he said. "I do have some more questions for you." He followed her into the resort's old restaurant—now a staff cafeteria. This early, they pretty much had the room to themselves. A small buffet offered salad makings and two soups, along with breads that smelled fresh.

"We're a boost to the local economy." She smiled crookedly as she arranged sushi around a mound of marinated vegetables. "There wasn't much local economy left, after the resort closed. Mr. Kraj, we are an entertainment-oriented society. Science has to be sexy, or it gets no money. Unless it is backed by commercial money, and then it has to *make* money." She faced him, clutching her plate like a shield. "We're forgetting how to look to the future—to *wonder*. We're only concerned with the moment."

"Is this tirade directed at me personally, or the media as a whole?" Anton selected a slice of tomato, added it to his plate. "Why should anyone pay to satisfy your curiosity about Jupiter?"

"*My* curiosity?" Li closed her eyes briefly. "Doesn't anyone *else* want to

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know? Does it have to make money or boost some media company's stock on the Exchange? Yes, I know it does." She marched stiffly to an empty table. "Maybe this race has already dead-ended."

"I doubt it." Anton seated himself across from her. "Where did you get Jonah's human overlay?"

"We purchased the virtual recordings from a broker." She blinked. "You're welcome to look at the invoice, but the donor's name isn't on it. What does this have to do with Europa AM?"

"Nothing." Anton pulled his notebook from his pocket, laid it beside his untouched salad and opened his atrium. "I'd like to see that invoice, please."

For a moment, Li stared at him, her lips tight. "Excuse me." She rose, picked up his notebook, and carried it over to the wall. Plugging it into a dataport, she touched keys for a few moments, then unplugged it and brought it back. "I downloaded it into your atrium." She set the notebook down on the table with a small click, and glanced at her watch.

"Another meeting?" He raised an eyebrow.

"A sim session with Jonah. *Our* version, not his." She picked up her tray, then stood still, staring down at Anton. "Have you ever faced a difficult decision about something you believed in?" she asked quietly. "Or do you believe in anything at all?"

"I believe in truth," he said, but she was already carrying her tray to the kitchen.

So the shimmering reef was Jonah's fantasy. Or perhaps it was his hope. Anton accessed his atrium and stared at his plate as the images appeared on his lenses. New data, he subvocalized, and an invoice appeared, black letters floating in a sea of blue. Jovan Corporation had purchased rights to certain bio-medical records from a broker, who had purchased them from a private hospital.

The patient's name was not part of the contract.

The hospital was the one in which Elliot had died.

Endit. The letters vanished. He realized that he had clenched his hands into fists, and opened them slowly. He picked up his tray, carried it to the kitchen window, and set it down beside Li's untouched food. We are not doing justice to the local resources, he thought as he set the tray down.

"I'm not certain that I understand your complaint," the hospital administrator said politely. He looked down at the surface of his teak desk, sitting straight but relaxed in his tastefully decorated virtual Office. "You sold us various organs, clone rights for several cell types, and you released any claim to recorded test results. The contract was standard and legal. It was signed and retina-printed by you in the presence of our in-house notary."

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"I have my own copy of the contract." Anton clenched his teeth. "I know that I waived my claim to test results." He had tried to remember them all—biochemistry, EEG, EKG, various scans of organs, brain, tissues. Nothing that would give a space probe his son's personality. "I'm asking about the virtual interactives that Elliot spent time with. Those were *not* tests." He leaned forward, wanting to grab the man by the shoulders and shake him. How would the virtual react if he did? "The interactives were entertainment, not treatment." Although the doctor had suggested it. He said they got less depression and consequent suppression of the immune system if paralyzed patients could at least move in virtual. "They were my gift to Elliot." They had dived together, hiked, and climbed mountains. "*Did you record my son's virtual time?*"

"There's no need to get angry, Mr. Kraj," the administrator soothed.

"I want to know if the interactives were recorded." Anton uttered each word slowly and clearly. This conversation was like trying to wade through mud. "That's all." They *had* to have been recorded. That was the only way someone would have enough input about Elliot to create someone who laughed like he had, who said things Elliot would have said. People had watched the two of them play, had listened to them talk. Anton drew a slow deep breath, trying to calm himself.

"I'm sorry." The administrator said stiffly. "I see no reason to access our files at your demand."

"I'm his *father*. His legal guardian."

"You released all rights to your son's test results. You were paid for that release. That is the end of the matter. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Go to hell. Exit." Anton pulled off his skinthin gloves as his room reappeared. He put his head down on his desk wanting to pound on it with his fists until the fake wood cracked and broke. Or his fists did.

"You have a visitor," his House system announced. "Your neighbor, Cam."

"I'm not home. House, cancel that." He sighed. "Let him in." He hadn't decided if he liked his neighbor or not, but right now any distraction was welcome.

"I'm glad you were home. I want to celebrate with someone." Grinning, Cam waved a champagne bottle and twin glasses at him. "Real California vintage. Sonoma Valley. Drip irrigated with one hundred percent fresh water and hand picked."

"What happened?" Anton straightened, and tossed his gloves onto his desk.

"I filled this tough contract." Cam laughed as the cork popped and bounced off the ceiling. "Even *I* had my doubts about whether I could do it. I'd say I'm even better than I think, but actually, I was just lucky." He

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handed Anton a tulip-shaped glass of pale wine. "Cheers." The glasses chimed faintly as they touched.

"Congratulations." Anton lifted his glass and sipped.

"What's wrong?" Cam perched on the corner of Anton's desk. "I'm not so full of myself that I'm totally blind. Did you get kicked off your story?"

"*Nobody* kicks me off a story." Anton's lips twisted. "A very polite hospital administrator just told me that my son's medical records were none of my business."

"Oh yeah. Hospitals." Cam drank wine and rolled his eyes. "They figure they own your soul as well as your body."

Anton winced.

"I like you. I really like your online stuff. You go for blood and you don't fool around." Cam stared into his wine, one foot swinging idly. "Do you ever use, uh . . . illegally obtained information?" he asked after awhile.

"Hacked, you mean?" Anton studied him. "If I did, I certainly wouldn't admit it to anyone."

"Yeah." Cam swirled the wine in his glass. "Let's just say that I might . . . be able to get a copy of those records for you." He gave Anton a cautious sideways glance. "Maybe. And maybe not."

Anton sipped his own wine. This could be a set-up. There were certainly plenty of people who had reason to nail him. Cam had never felt quite right to him. He was careful never to ask about the source of his informants' information. Penalties for illegal entry into private dataspace were very high, and ignorance was a shaky defense at best. But he was good at smelling a trap. "I'd like to get hold of those records," he said cautiously. "I'd be very indebted." He studied the tiny bubbles rising in his glass.

"If I find anything out, it's a gift." Cam leaned over to touch the rim of his glass to Anton's. "Because you're good at what you do."

"Thanks." Anton let Cam refill his glass, and suppressed a brief twinge of uneasiness.

He didn't want to talk to Jonah any more, but if he was going to gut Jovan in the end, Jonah was their weakest point. The rest of the staff presented a united and unanimously uninformative front. With the right slant, he could turn the probe-A.I. into an exploited child slave, or a monster. Whichever worked best. Jonah was the hook that would land him his audience and boost NewsNet's stock out of its current slump. For at least a week, anyway.

Business. So why the hell did he feel guilty?

"I'm glad you're spending time with Jonah." Sandra Li nodded from behind her desk. Gray light from the overcast day cast shadows beneath her eyes, as if she wasn't sleeping well. "He likes you."

"He's an A.I.," Anton said.

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"Yes." Li turned to look out her window at the gray convergence of sea and sky. "He is, isn't he?"

Then she suggested that he go swim with Jonah. Which was what Anton had intended to ask, but he had expected her to balk. She had let him sit in on one of their training sims, too. No reefs in her version, but she had given him quite a tour. Anton pondered the change in her behavior as he walked down to the boathouse. Before, she had been helpful because someone had ordered her to be helpful. He wondered what lay beneath her gracious invitations. Something. She was neither naïve nor stupid, and she knew he was on to them. Even if it would be difficult to prove in court, there was no doubt that Europa AM was slipping money through the convenient economic wormhole of Jovan Corporation. And Sandra Li, director, knew all about it.

A chilling possibility occurred to Anton as he walked into the cavernous boat house. Accidents could happen out in the ocean. Was she *that* desperate? A coveralled technician sat cross-legged beside the diving pool, a notebook on his lap. "Hi." He smiled, polite but wary. "If you're looking for Jonah, he's just finishing a test sequence. Five minutes, okay?"

"Ask him if he wants to take me swimming, will you?" Anton looked over the technician's shoulder as the man relayed his question to Jonah. He focused his cameras on the screen, even though the numbers meant nothing to him. Scientific ambiance.

"Sure I'll take you swimming." Jonah's voice sounded in his ear. "You could have asked me yourself, you know. Just access *fish* and you'll get me. I set it up when I hacked you into the sim."

"He says he'd be glad to take you swimming." The technician touched his laptop screen and the numbers winked out.

"What's it like working with him?" Anton asked curiously.

"With Jonah?" The technician smiled at the empty pool. "Sometimes you forget he's not a kid. And then he does a whole string of stress calculations, or figures something out long before you do, and you remember what he *really* is. Jonah does have quite a sense of humor." His grin widened. "I do most of the undersea testing with him, and he's really gotten me good a couple of times. I'm all done here. Scuba gear is in that locker." He nodded. "Need any help?"

"Thanks, I'll manage." Anton watched as the technician tucked the notebook into his coverall and left. He was friendlier than most of the people here. "Can I buy you a beer some afternoon?" he asked. "I'd like to get a feel for the project and for Jonah—through your perspective."

"Sure, I guess." The technician was trying to sound nonchalant, but he was pleased. "Hey, I've always wanted to be famous."

Him and everybody else. "Great." Anton clasped his hand briefly.

"I'm Denny O'Shea."

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"I'll look you up." Anton headed for the gear locker. Maybe he had finally found his crack in the staff's united front of silence. Anton plugged a new hard-data sphere into his skinthins and inspected the scuba gear. The racked tanks were light—cutting edge bio-rebreathers, he noted. His skinthins were waterproof, so he left them on as he donned a lightweight wetsuit.

"You don't really need to interview Denny, do you?" Jonah's voice sounded in his ear. "I turned off the sound on the security monitors for the room so you can talk," he said cheerfully.

"Well, no, I don't really think I can use an interview with Denny." Anton found himself unexpectedly reluctant to lie to Jonah. "But I might. You never know. So don't tell him, okay?"

"I won't." Jonah sounded thoughtful. "He would be hurt. Thanks for going swimming with me."

"Like I said—you're the most interesting person here. And the smartest," Anton said, hearing that echo of loneliness again. "Do they know that you've hacked their security to pieces?"

"Nah." Jonah's sheepish tone made Anton smile. "I don't *do* anything. It was a challenge, you know? Well, I did do a *little* bit, I guess." His sheepish tone intensified. "I hid you an access, and I fixed your chip."

"My chip?" Anton donned his breather mask and carried his fins over to the pool.

"It was only supposed to work when Sandy keyed you in. And some places were locked off. Like the sim lab. She guessed when she found you there, but she didn't say anything to me." Jonah surfaced, water running down his silvery back. "You can go anywhere anytime, now."

"You won't get in trouble?" Anton asked, and realized that he was really worrying. A.I. *Not* kid. *Not* son. He let his breath out slowly. "What's it like for you, here?" Anton checked to make sure that his headband was in place and that he was still in record mode.

"It's fine." Jonah sank slowly beneath the surface. "I run a lot of tests in the water. This body has some modifications so that it feels pretty much like the body I'll be wearing on Jupiter. We even found a good offshore rip that is a little like the wind I'll be riding."

The body I'll be wearing, he had said. As if the soul could be decanted from one container to the other. As if he were software. Well, he *was* software to a large extent, wasn't he? Anton reminded himself wryly. *Jonah* wasn't confused about his identity. Anton submerged, pressure squeezing his ears until he swallowed and they popped. The white-noise whisper of underwater filled his head.

He loved to dive. It was as close to flying as you could get as a landbound mammal. He had taught Elliot, and Elliot had loved it, too. Anton swallowed, and concentrated on following Jonah's sleek silhouette. They went out along the edge of the cove, staying inside its protective arms.

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Sea anemones bloomed along the rocky underwater slopes, salmon and rose—the colors of Jupiter's hydrogen sulfide cloud layer.

"Do you know that tube worms live in volcanic vents?" Jonah's tone was thoughtful. "Life is really adaptable. I bet there are all kinds of creatures living in Jupiter's layers. Maybe even . . . intelligent species."

"Maybe." Anton swam up beside Jonah, hearing a kid's dreams in his voice. "Then you'll be more famous online than me, even."

"Yeah." Jonah angled downward toward the base of a coral pillar. "Look, a ray." A slender arm emerged from Jonah's belly, and he prodded the sand with a three-fingered hand. The ray erupted in a cloud of silt, flapping away to settle sullenly to the bottom once again. "That would be a good design for Jupiter's gas sea," he said casually.

"Jovian rays would have to be a lot more solid than those reef creatures you showed me."

"Gas rays," Jonah said. "They could be more solid. They could even be intelligent."

"Gas rays." Anton caught hold of Jonah's dorsal fin, let Jonah pull him through the water. "You think they're there, too, don't you?" he asked softly. "Intelligent rays?"

"Didn't Sandy tell you?" Jonah's tone was flat. "They're an illusion of computer manipulation."

"She told me," Anton said softly. "*Are* they there?"

"Yes." Jonah speeded up. "I'm going to give them real proof this time—solid proof."

I'm going to get well, Elliot had said in that same tone. Brief guilt pierced Anton. If he exposed Jovan for the fraud it was, then Jonah wouldn't get to go. But if Jovan *was* the scam that he suspected it was, then they would probably fail to actually launch the project anyway. Or they might abort the project and leave Jonah cut off and stranded.

"If I was straight software, I wouldn't care," Jonah said thoughtfully. "Sometimes I wish . . ." He fell briefly silent. "Want to see a neat place I found?" he asked abruptly. "It's a reef where some of the corals mutated. They formed these really neat spires."

"Show me," Anton said. What do you wish? he wondered. That you didn't have to care? Me, too, he thought bitterly. "I saw some mutated corals down off the coast of Mexico once."

They went and looked at the beautiful coral garden, and they raced across the cove. (Anton lost, even though he suspected that Jonah was holding back.) Jonah showed him his favorite places—the private gardens of a lonely child. And Anton rode the watery roller coaster of the offshore currents, clinging to Jonah's dorsal fin.

They explored the whole cove, equally excited by small finds of dark purple urchins, a rare type of whelk. It was fun. "Do you remember that time on the Barrier Reef?" Anton asked, as he crawled exhausted out of

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the water. And with a clench of fear, realized what he had just said. "Never mind." He pulled his mask off and busied himself with disconnecting his rebreather. "I'm tired."

"Okay." Jonah floated in the pool, motionless as a dead log. "You coming back tomorrow?"

"I . . . I don't know." Anton didn't look at him. "I . . . might have to work on another piece."

"Yeah." Jonah sank like a stone. "Sure."

"Wait," Anton said, but he got no answer.

He was still recording. "Endit," he subvocalized. "Delete all." The whole day. All of it.

Are you sure? his system voice whispered through his implant. *Really sure?*

"I am not sure of anything anymore." He stood, his muscles shaky because he hadn't dived for a long time, carried the equipment back to its rack. "I'm not sure of one damn thing. Cancel delete." He banged the rebreather onto its rack.

The windows of the main hall were open. He heard laughter and smelled coffee. He had meant to interview some of the staff today, but he had connected with O'Shea. And their polite wariness would feel like an accusation. *You are going to kill Jonah's dreams.* No, Anton thought angrily. *You* are.

In the end, Jonah would still lose. Someone always did.

His anger tasted sour in his mouth, like old ashes.

He stopped in at a public clinic on his way home. One was much like another. The pictures on reception-room walls varied, but that was about all. "How may I direct you?" asked the flesh-and-blood receptionist. "General medicine?"

"Psychiatric," Anton said, and handed the man his card.

"Follow the purple line." The receptionist zipped his card through a reader and handed it back with a professional smile. "Have a nice day."

Anton grunted. A line of purple light appeared at his feet. It led through a door and he followed it down a wide hallway, past unmarked doors that concealed diagnostic cubicles with their sick, or anxious, or depressed occupants. Bland, gentle music played in the background, and the air smelled faintly of flowers. The private hospital where Elliot had dreamed and died had been even prettier—with holographic windows full of scenic views, and gourmet food.

And when it was all over, you were left with your grief and the bills. And they devoured the body and soul of the loved one you lost. The purple light-line ended at one of the ivory-colored doors. Anton opened it, walked through, and sat down in the padded recliner before the room could invite him to do so.

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"Hello, Anton." A man shimmered to life beside the couch, seated and relaxed in a matching chair. "What's troubling you today?"

He always got a male holo. Anton wondered what it was in his personal file that prompted male images only. "I've seen a ghost," he said.

"A ghost, really?" The holo-doctor leaned forward, his expression interested. "Where?"

At Jovan, he would say, and then the doctor-protocol would ask him if it was someone he had known, and then it would ask him how he felt about that person's death, and . . .

I have found my son, and he is as unreal as you. Only I am having trouble remembering that.

"So where did you see this ghost?" the doctor-image prompted gently. Warmly.

"I didn't." Anton got up. "I saw a fish. There are no such things as ghosts."

"Sit down and relax, Anton. There's no hurry. Tell me about this fish."

Anton closed the door behind him. The purple light had vanished, but he had no trouble finding his way back to the reception area. The receptionist looked up from his screen, his young face indifferent behind his professional smile. "Have a nice day," he said.

His rented apartment looked unfamiliar when he opened the door. He stood on the threshold, trying to remember other apartments, details of upholstery or color scheme or layout. He remembered only rooms, beds, tables set with microwave meals. All that remained were the *stories*—the editing, the careful scene choice that gave the piece its emotional shading. And he wondered suddenly if he was any more human than Jonah.

"Yo, Anton! I thought I heard the elevator."

Anton looked over his shoulder. Cam was grinning. "You got it," Anton said softly. A crystal of ice began to form in his gut. "Come in." He ushered Cam inside. "Let me have it." He leaned his back against the door, as if Cam might try to bolt.

"Yes, I got it." Still grinning, Cam pulled a hard-data sphere from his pocket, tossed it lightly on his palm. "They sure ran a lot of tests on your kid."

"Santorres was new and interesting." Anton plucked the sphere from Cam's palm, walked over to his desk, and socketed it into his terminal.

"It'll come up as a list." Cam looked over his shoulder. "You want details, you can window-in to that particular test. I lifted it all—the doctors' log, and everything. Just for good measure. Man, it was some job. They got good security there."

"I imagine they do." Anton pulled on gloves. All private hospitals had tight security. They wouldn't attract clients, otherwise. "I'm impressed. Ah." The syllable was in between a groan and a sigh.

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He had known they would be there—recordings of those virtual afternoons. But seeing them listed with blood pressure, urinalysis, CAT scans—it hit him hard. Virtual Interactives—the filename was there in damning black letters. Anton touched the capital V, and blinked as he found himself donning scuba gear on a rocky shore.

"I can't wait to get out there." Elliot wiped his mask with an anti-fog cloth. "Let's do that one reef—the one with all the anemones. Dad?" He looked up at Anton, his eyes wide in his tan, healthy face. "I forget sometimes, when we're diving like this. Maybe it's easier to let virtual be real if you don't have a future. I know I'm not going to get better. You don't have to pretend for me, Dad."

"Endit." Anton closed his eyes. The hospital had sold this moment. Strangers had watched. Maybe they had snickered. Slow hot anger flushed his skin.

"Bad news?" Cam asked.

Anton blinked at him. "Tell me what I owe you for this," he grated. "Whatever you want."

"I said it was a gift." Cam shook his head as he got to his feet. "I'm glad I could help, but it looks as if I brought you a bunch of grief. If there's anything more I can do . . ."

Anton shook his head. "Thanks," he whispered. "Thanks a lot."

"Sure." Cam paused in the doorway. "I've got a bottle of really good Napoleon brandy on my shelf," he said. "Knock on my door any time." He lifted a hand and left.

Anton drew two slow calming breaths as the door closed behind Cam, then turned back to the terminal. His legs ached from the unaccustomed exercise of swimming. He hesitated, remembering Jonah's voice as he talked about Jupiter. Jonah. Elliot. Prototype. Stolen soul. Anton pulled his gloves back on. "Fish." He blinked as the room shimmered and vanished.

He had expected some kind of atrium. Instead he found himself skimming through opalescent mist beneath a pink sky. Some distance ahead, Jonah swam gracefully through Jupiter's ammoniated gas-sea, twisting in and out between the frail wind-borne reefs. Apparently Jonah hadn't yet realized that Anton had dropped into ghost mode. Anton opened his mouth to speak, closed it as Jonah swooped upward and rolled, obviously playing, enjoying himself. Playing, the way Elliot had played among the virtual corals of Earth's sea. Anton swallowed, gathering the words to speak, to tell Jonah . . . what?

Without warning, the opalescent mist-sea erupted. A pillar of cloud burst skyward. The rose and gold hydrogen sulfide ceiling seemed to shrink from the contact, opening like a wound as the ugly column pierced it. A hapless reef was sucked into the churning vapor, shredding away into fragments that swirled and vanished in the turbulence. Jonah had

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turned to flee. His thick tail churned, huge flukes fanning desperately, fins working. But he was made to ride the wind, not defeat it. He slid tail first toward the column.

"Jonah!" Anton yelled. A finger of cloud curled around Jonah, and for an agonized instant he seemed to hold his own against the storm. Then, in horrible slow motion, a fin tore away, then part of his fluke. Writhing as if in agony, Jonah disintegrated, ripped slowly to pieces by the invisible claws of the wind. A shrill terrible scream echoed through Anton's skull, and he screamed with it, a hoarse, riven cry of horror.

Then he was back in his room. Panting, he stared down at his hands, at the red marks his nails had left on his palms. "Jonah," he whispered.

A dream, he told himself. It was an electronic dream, a simulation, no more real than his dives with the paralyzed Elliot.

The reality waited on Jupiter. A roomful of technicians would record Jonah's dying screams as he was torn apart, frozen, burned, and crushed by the gas giant. They would observe and analyze, the same way they had observed and analyzed Elliot's dive. *You don't have to pretend for me, Dad.* . . . Anton closed his eyes and shuddered. Jonah was only a prototype. A machine. They were entitled to observe. Breathing through his mouth, Anton entered his Office. "Access Legal Aide," he said harshly. "I want to sue for illegal use of my son's private records."

Anton was more than a little surprised that Jovan's security let him through the gate at the cove's entrance. A storm was moving in, and coveralled men and woman hurried past, heads bent against the gusts. The wind carried sand, scouring the exposed skin of Anton's face, and the Jovan employees stared at him with open hostility. They knew about his suit. Invasion of privacy, the lawyer had informed him. We will sue for that, and for breach of contract. Anton stood in front of the reception screen in the entry that was still decorated in oceanfront resort style, half expecting to get an icon and a polite message telling him that Ms. Li was permanently busy.

"You." She stared at him from the screen. "I never thought you'd have the nerve. . . . Oh yes, I *do* want to talk to you, Mr. Anton Kraj." The screen went blank.

A green light-line winked on in the floor. He followed it to the ocean side of the building, and into a small, bright office. Orchids bloomed in the windows, filling the room with a humid tropical scent. "I can't believe you did this." Stiffly upright behind her desk, Li tapped a sheet of hard-copy with one fingernail. "I would like to hear your reasons before I have you thrown off the property."

"Reasons?" He met her angry glare. Her skin looked as if it had been stretched tightly over the bones of her face, and her eyes were darkly shadowed. "How can you even ask? You used my son's dying . . . our last

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months together . . ." He choked, struggled for rational, civilized words. "When I held his hand, he couldn't even close his fingers around mine. All we had were those dives together. You used all that." His voice cracked. "You used his hope, his fear, his few moments of joy. You *used* it."

"Mr. Kraj. Anton." She leaned toward him, her eyes huge and dark in her thin face. "I am sorry. I did not know and . . . I am truly sorry. We bought those recordings in good faith. We should have checked the hospital's release, and we didn't. That's our fault, yes. But we did not steal your son's soul. Those recordings were treated with great respect. What is done is done." She was pleading now, one hand stretched across the satiny surface of her desk. "Jonah *exists*. We won't be able to use him as he is, if the court decides that we have no rights to those original files. We won't be able to make the launch." She looked him directly in the eyes. "He wants to go, Anton."

"He's an artificial intelligence." He turned his face away. "Don't play emotion games with me."

"Are you really that cold?" she breathed. "You have such a reputation for finding out scams and fraud. But it's always in the sciences. Why, Mr. Kraj? Are you punishing all of science because one small company was careless?"

"They were not careless." He said stonily. "They were intentionally fraudulent. And I'm not punishing anyone."

"Bullshit." She stood. "Security." She raised her voice. "You may escort Mr. Kraj from the premises now."

"Sandy?" A familiar male voice issued from invisible speakers. "We've got trouble. Jonah's gone."

"*What?*" Li glanced sideways at Anton. "What do you mean, *gone?* I told you to keep an eye on him, Denny!"

"I was." Denny sounded miserable. "He was running the sims—his own, you know? And I went to grab a sandwich at the cafeteria because he's always in there for at least a couple of hours. I was just gone ten minutes. When I got back, he was gone."

"Cove security here. Brevin." A deeper voice superimposed itself over Denny's. "We just picked something up on its way out of the cove. It looks like Jonah's signal."

"It is," Li said tightly. She pressed the heel of her hand to her temple. "Where is he heading?"

"Maybe toward The Run." Brevin sounded doubtful. "I might be wrong. It's hard to track him. That offshore storm is kicking up a hell of a lot of silt. And he knows not to go there . . . so I don't know."

"We can't take any chances," Li said tightly. "Pick me up on the dock in one minute."

"On my way."

"Use the big boat." Her voice was harsh. "We might need the cradle."

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She lifted her head and looked at Anton. "He's on his way out to The Run," she said coldly. "It's a rocky chute between the headland and the big rocks at the cove mouth. The current is a killer when the tide has turned. And we've got storm surge on top of it all. The rocks could seriously damage him."

Like the storm had torn him to pieces in the sim Anton had stumbled into? "You told him?" he asked softly.

"*I* didn't, but everybody knows." She palmed the door open, started down the hall at a fast walk. "I . . . didn't tell him who had filed the suit. He likes you." Her voice dripped bitterness. "He thinks you're his friend."

And it occurred to Anton that she had *wanted* them to be friends, to perhaps let his friendship with Jonah become their shield. No wonder she had been so willing to let Anton play with Jonah. Nice bit of attempted manipulation.

Right now, he didn't care. "I'm coming with you." He caught up with her.

"Like hell." She burst through the door at the end of the corridor.

Wind lashed Anton's hair into his eyes as he followed. The offshore storm was building fast, whipping the cove into white-capped waves. A boat churned through the chop, engines throbbing a low note as it sidled up to the dock at the foot of the slope. Li broke into a run, her feet pounding the wooden planks. The boat was already starting to pull away from the dock as she leaped on board. They weren't going to wait for him. Anton sprinted to the edge of the dock and leaped. He landed with centimeters to spare, tottering as the boat yawed in the chop. For a terrible instant, he thought they were going to let him go over, leave him to drown or flounder back to the dock. Then hands grabbed him and hauled him onto the slippery deck.

"Take him back!" Li snapped, livid with anger. "Never mind, there isn't time. Just stay out of our way. This is *your* fault!" She turned her back on him and ducked into the cabin.

The two coveralled men on deck gave him quick sullen looks. One of them followed Li into the cabin. "Look, I'm worried about him, too," Anton said to the man who had helped him. It was Denny. "How are you going to find him?"

"We already know where he is." Denny looked unhappy. "He's got a locator beacon that can be activated by remote. He's in The Run. If he gets too badly bashed up, he could wreck some pretty expensive hardware."

Suicide? Anton clung to the rail as Denny hurried away. No, he told himself. This wasn't a moody teenage kid, this was a carefully engineered machine intelligence. It would not damage itself intentionally. The leaden sky mocked him, and the clouds on the horizon reminded him of the updraft storm that had destroyed Jonah in his sim.

The overlay was an experiment, Li had told him. Maybe this *was* a

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moody kid. Maybe *worse* than the average moody kid. The boat bucked and rolled as the captain angled toward the narrow channel between a rocky cliff face and a cluster of three huge rocks that jutted thirty feet above the water. The Run. Water churned white and spray exploded as storm waves thundered onto the headland. Fangs of rock gleamed wet and black between the breaking waves. The captain held the boat at the edge of the worst turbulence. It was rough. Incoming waves, driven by the approaching storm, lifted the nose of the boat from the water, then let it slam down into the following trough. Anton's stomach clenched unhappily.

And then, as a wave receded, he caught a glint of silver almost directly below him. Or maybe it was a trick of the light. He strained his eyes, hanging on to the bucking rail, waiting for the wave to recede. There! The silver glint could be Jonah's tail fluke. If so, he was lying on the bottom, rolling like a driftwood log in the wash of the waves. How long until he rolled onto the rocks? He blinked away a vision of Jonah rupturing in the updraft storm.

Pound on the cabin door, he thought. Tell them. But by the time he got their attention, explained, the boat would have drifted away. Or Jonah might have hit the rocks. A life-ring hung on the railing, attached to a stout rope. Anton yanked it free, and unclipped the ring from the line. The rope might be strong enough to haul Jonah up, or at least keep him here, away from the rocks. Wrapping the end of the rope about his fist, Anton kicked off his shoes and jumped into the trough between waves.

The retreating wave sucked at him, trying to drag him out to sea. He fought it, angling downward, groping for Jonah's hull because he was blind in the silty wash. His lungs felt as if they were on fire when the knuckles of his rope hand banged something that wasn't quite as hard as metal. Chest aching, he grabbed, hung on tight as the surge tried to tear him loose. Tail, he thought in relief. Flukes. . . . The sea dragged them both along the bottom, and he heard the dull scrape of rocks against Jonah's body. He fumbled the rope around Jonah's tail just in front of the flukes, where it was only as thick as his ankle. Lungs on fire, he headed for the surface.

"Anton?" Jonah's voice exploded in his head. "What are you doing?"

Anton's head broke the surface and he gasped, desperate for air. A wave caught him by surprise, picked him up, and tumbled him end over end. His shoulder scraped rock as a giant's hand shoved him through the water. Then his head hit, and pain sheeted red through the darkness behind his eyes.

Swim or you drown. Old reflexes took over, and he tried, but his legs moved heavily, sluggishly. His right arm was numb—an icy weight that dragged him deeper. He reached groggily for the ring on his diving vest

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. . . pull it, Elliot, pull the ring before you think you need to. That's rule one on a dive.

Oh yeah, Elliot was dead, and he wasn't diving. He was drowning.

Anton could barely feel the water at all—was floating in a gentle darkness. Then something hard bumped him with enough force that he almost yelled and drowned right then and there. A moment later, water broke across his face and he was gasping, choking, trying to suck air into lungs that hurt like hell.

"What were you *doing?*" Jonah's exasperation reverberated through his head. "You almost drowned!"

Jonah was holding him in his retractable manipulator arms, Anton realized groggily. "I was . . . trying . . . to get a rope on you." And Jonah had saved *him*. The irony made him laugh, and he choked again. "Thought . . . you were in trouble," he managed to gasp.

"I wasn't." Jonah sighed. "I made it through The Run easy. I was just . . . thinking. Sandy is chewing me out even as we speak," he said, a little sulkily. "I just didn't feel like talking to anyone."

"Why?" Anton whispered. "Why take the risk?"

"They were underestimating what I could *do*. I know how this prototype works better than anyone." His voice had gone hard. "And what does it matter if I get bashed up? Some asshole filed suit against us. If he wins, we won't launch, and then I'm just a worthless piece of junk."

An engine growl rose above the whine of the wind and the slap of the water. "I'm the asshole," Anton said quickly. They wouldn't let him near Jonah again. "I filed the suit."

"You?" Jonah's arms quivered, and, for an instant, Anton thought he would drop him. "Why?" he asked, and the hurt in his voice made Anton close his eyes briefly.

"Li thinks it's revenge, but it's not." Anton's teeth were starting to chatter. "You're wrong, Jonah," he said. "This program *is* a scam." The boat was almost on them now. "The people who are funding you don't really care. They may yank their money any time and leave you stranded up there for good. They may *want* you to fail. You just don't know, and your director doesn't want to know. You'll end up as a sacrifice for no good reason." Rationalization. His own voice mocked him. That's not why you filed the suit, Anton Kraj, admit it.

Someone splashed down into the water beside them, and rough hands seized Anton. "They'll destroy you," he gasped. "Or Jupiter will." Then a wet-suited figure was belting a harness around him. A winch whined, the line jerked tight, and they hauled him onto the deck like a hooked fish, shivering and dripping.

Jonah never answered him.

They escorted him from the cove—very politely and very firmly. He

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took an auto-cab to his tower, soaking wet, still shivering in spite of the heat blasting from the vents. They had let him know—Li and the others—that he had made a total fool of himself. And that he was no longer welcome at the cove.

It was the silence in his head that hurt. And that shouldn't matter at all, because Jonah was a machine, and any echoes of Elliot were just that—programmed responses lifted from more than a thousand hours of virtual interactives. But he kept remembering what Jonah had said about the prejudice against a bio-interface. *Like you could turn someone into a machine by doing a direct brain interface. . . .* The public believed precisely that.

So did it follow that the *reverse* was true? Could you turn a machine into a child? Anton zipped his card through the cab's reader as it pulled up in front of his tower. He had answered that question for himself when he had panicked and jumped into the water.

"Have a nice day," the auto-cab said in a sweet androgynous voice.

He changed into dry clothes, squeezed by his impersonal apartment. He had welcomed the transient life of rented space. Those rooms with their standard decor permitted no ghosts, no tricks of association to hook him back into yesterday. He had spent the last ten years living in the immediate now of a new story, a new scam to untangle, the demands of piecing a drama together from words and images.

His terminal chimed softly. "Mr. Truc is calling," his system voice told him.

Samuel Truc was his lawyer. Anton reached for his gloves. "Access," he said aloud, and found himself in his lawyer's Office. The virtual room was furnished heavily in dark wood, and the small Asian Truc looked positively tiny behind the polished expanse of his huge desk.

"The judge granted our request for an injunction against further use of the interactive recordings." Truc was smiling. "Jovan filed an immediate petition for review with the appellate court. The court declined to review. That is a good sign." He nodded briskly. "Our suit against Sweet Mercy Hospital has not yet been scheduled, but we should hear within the week."

Anton nodded, wanting to feel triumph. He merely felt tired. And cold. Who is the owner of a soul? he wondered bitterly. Who holds the copyright?

"I'll contact you when the case is scheduled. I have very few doubts as to the outcome." Truc eyed Anton, obviously waiting for some kind of reaction.

"Thank you, yes," Anton said heavily. "I appreciate all you did."

He exited quickly, rude, and unable to be anything else. The sterile room mocked him. Stranger's room. Not home—never home. *Home* had

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ended with Elliot. He went out into the hall and knocked on Cam's door. Cam opened it immediately, and smiled.

"Ready for that brandy?" He swung the door wide.

Cam's apartment was decorated in much the same style as Anton's. Leased decor. Holos of adults and children in smiling, self-conscious poses cluttered the horizontal spaces, but in spite of this evidence of home and family, the room was as impersonal as Anton's. Again, something nudged him, something to do with Cam.

At the moment, he didn't really care. Accepting the glass of liquor Cam handed him, he dropped onto the sofa.

"To confusion." Perched on the arm of a fabric-covered recliner, Cam lifted his glass.

"Confusion," Anton echoed and raised the glass to his lips. The brandy burned all the way down, and the fumes seemed to soak instantly into his brain.

He found himself telling Cam everything—about Elliot and Jonah, about the launch he could stop, and Jovan's clandestine connection to Europa. "They're using him," he said, seeing that Cam didn't really care, but unable to stop telling him. "Even *Li* is using him." The words slurred as he tried to get his tongue around them.

"You're doing the right thing." Cam was sitting beside him, although Anton didn't remember him moving from the chair. "You're right to stop them."

Anton tried to nod, but the brandy had short-circuited his brain and nothing worked very well. It was getting dark, and he wanted to ask Cam to turn on the lights, but he was too comfortable to make the effort of speech, and Cam agreed that he was doing the right thing. He was sleepy, and his eyes kept closing. He struggled to open them one last time, caught a glimpse of Cam's face close to his and felt his neighbor's fingers on his face, stroking his neck. Stop it, he tried to say, but he was too tired, and his eyes closed, and he couldn't get them open again.

The salmon-and-gold light of Jupiter woke him. Anton blinked and stretched, and he tilted sideways, gliding down through the opalescent mist. Ahead, a gold-and-orange reef drifted along on the wind. Adapted for this world, it was easy to forget that this "breeze" was a good two hundred kilometers per hour. Things were flying into the reef, ducking in and out of the ever-changing folds, as if they were playing tag. They reminded him of the rays he and Jonah had watched in the cove. Jonah's gas rays, he thought and stiffened, wide-awake now. The reaction stalled his forward momentum and the wind shoved at him, trying to tumble him like the waves had tumbled him in the cove.

Automatically, he kicked, as if he was swimming. And moved forward. Flying. A sudden exhilaration filled him. This might be a dream, but it

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was *fun*. He stretched his arms in front of him, looked down at the articulated manipulators that appeared. He was a gas fish, like Jonah. The reef was close. He canted his body slightly, changed course to slide in a long lazy arc around a slowly twisting protrusion. This close, he could see how the reef continuously tore in the wind, and continuously repaired itself. Rays scattered gracefully, and a couple of smaller ones followed him, as if they were curious. It was like diving in a current. You didn't fight the flow. You used it to send you where you wanted to go. He looped and rolled, exhilarated. And laughed as the small rays mimicked him. "I know someone who wants to meet you," he said, and wished that Jonah could share this dream. Swimming hard, he climbed over the top edge of the reef. The wind eroded it into a fine red-gold dust that scattered and vanished. Seeds? he wondered. Spores? A large shape moved in a fold of the billowing reef. Anton hesitated, wondering if he should flee, reminding himself that this was only a dream as the shadow bulked closer.

"Hi." Jonah emerged into view, his flukes moving slowly and rhythmically. "I fixed the sim so that you don't have to ghost."

"I thought . . . I was dreaming."

"I wanted to talk to you." Jonah's tone was sad. "I'm sorry about hacking you in here like this."

"It's okay." Anton managed to hold his place by working his tail and side fins slowly. "I . . . I didn't expect to hear from you again." He groped for the words he needed, but the wind had scattered them.

"Sandy told me that . . . the overlay came from your son." Jonah's fins and tail moved with a ponderous grace that fit this world of wind and immensity. "You told me I reminded you of him. She said the hospital sold it without telling you."

"Yes," Anton said hoarsely. Above them, the reef seemed to writhe in the wind, constantly reshaped and reshaping. Like human lives, he thought, and laughed bitterly. "You do remind me of Elliot. Way too much. I should probably go in for treatment. But it doesn't alter the fact that you're a pawn." Anton clenched his fist, but the gesture didn't translate into virtual. "I still plan to stop them from using you."

"Why?" Jonah let the wind take him, swooping gracefully away, gliding and looping like the rays who flapped, startled, out of his way.

"Because . . . I care about you." This world demanded truth. "You have some of . . . my son's soul. And to hell with what the theologians might say about that. I don't . . . want you to die." Again, he didn't add.

For awhile, Jonah was silent, and they drifted along on the wind beneath a rose-and-gold ceiling of hydrogen sulfide, bejeweled with droplets of ammoniated dew. Beautiful, Anton thought. This world is beautiful.

"If you win your suit," Jonah said at last, "what will happen to me?"

"I . . ." Anton swallowed. "I could offer Ms. Li a release to use Elliot's records. With the condition that you remain on Earth."

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"I don't *belong* on Earth." Jonah banked away from Anton, propelling himself with powerful sweeps of his tail. "You don't understand, Anton."

"You will die here," Anton said harshly.

"You said that. You can die on the street. Or in bed." He drifted on the wind, silhouetted against the pink sky. Two blood-red rays spiraled around him in widening arcs. "Sandy thinks this is illusion—my fantasy extrapolated from the bits of data we salvaged from the first probe." Jonah's voice sounded sad in Anton's head. "The first probe wasn't overlaid with a personality, but it was pretty complex—cutting-edge of the last generation of organic cores. It . . . I . . . talked to the rays. Not in words, you know. It happened after I was damaged—before the system shut down. It didn't come through in any form they could understand in the data dump. So they thought it was noise. They used that probe's transmissions to create me—like they used Elliot's dives." He drifted gently down to Anton's level again. "*I* remember them, too." Floating, nose to nose with Anton, he bumped him very gently. "I'm as much them as I am Elliot, Anton. I belong here."

Communication. Anton's mind reeled. First contact. Alien sentience.

"If you keep me on Earth, I still won't be Elliot. I want to go home, Anton."

Home. The word struck him like a fist. "Exit," Anton whispered, sliding down the Jovian wind. "Exit, please."

He woke in his own bed, blinking away fractured visions of pink clouds and Cam's smiling face close to his own. Dreams, he thought, struggling out of bed. Drunken dreams. He held his head in his hands, waiting out the fierce pulse of pain at the base of his skull. Hangover? Alcohol was not his thing, and the brandy had hit him hard last night. He remembered Cam's hands on him just as he passed out, and rubbed his face with a scowl. Wrong idea, Cam. His fingers paused as they encountered a small soreness on his shoulder. It felt like the spot where they'd implanted the security chip. He scratched, flaking off a tiny scab. Bright blood smeared his fingertips. Infection? It felt more like a scratch, and he wasn't sure if that was where the chip had been inserted or not.

It would be something to keep an eye on. Anton made his unsteady way to the shower, where he ran the water hot and cold until the worst of the headache had passed.

It hadn't been a dream. The more he tried to tell himself that it had been one, the more he knew it for a lie. Jonah had hacked him into his virtual Jupiter. Anton had passed out while still dressed in his skinthins. His bio-interface had given Jonah access.

Who is the owner of a soul?

I want to go home, Jonah whispered in the hiss of the shower. Anton turned off the spray, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went to his

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terminal. He was in luck. Denny O'Shea was listed in the local database. He was home. His image formed above the terminal holo-stage, yawning and sleepy-eyed.

"What do you want?" he asked as he recognized Anton. "I shouldn't even be talking to you."

"Don't exit." Anton gripped the edge of the table. "I need to know . . . what are you going to do with Jonah?"

"What do you care?" Denny's face was hard.

"If you couldn't use him for the probe, what would you do with him?" Anton persisted.

"We aren't going to do *anything* with him." Denny shook his head and stifled a yawn. "He's a probe. The only one we have. We're going to have to wipe the A.I.'s memory shell right down to the core and start over from scratch. It's gonna put the launch off a whole year. At least. Thanks to you."

"Is it scheduled? Stripping his memory?"

"This is my day off. I was out late last night. I'm going back to bed."

"Wait!" Anton cried, but Denny's face had vanished from the holostage.

Anton leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. Jonah was right. He wasn't Elliot. He wasn't a Jovian ray, either. He was a *probe.* A machine. You just reformatted and started over. "Access Sandra Li," he said hoarsely. "This is an emergency."

Li looked through her window, her face etched with bitter lines. "We have become addicted to entertainment." She glanced sideways at him. "You, of all people, must know that. Reality must be *exciting.* Stimulating. Do you know how much the Mars Project is spending on PR?"

"Yes," Anton said evenly. "I do. They tried to hire me."

"That figures." Her lips twisted. "I know about Jonah's rays. I don't know if there is any reality there, or how much. A.I.'s become . . . creative as they die. Some of the final data is suggestive, but we don't have enough to get us free media attention," she said grimly. "And we can't afford people like you—people who could turn a scrap of hope into an established first contact."

"I don't do that." Anton met her angry stare. "That's why I turned the Mars people down."

"That makes you a saint?"

"Not at all."

Her shoulders slumped and she looked away. "Europa—yes—*Europa,* damn it—offered us enough funding to get us back to Jupiter. We lost our previous funding because we didn't find anything wonderful," she said bitterly. "I pretend that I don't know how Europa gets its money, or what the cost is. But that's a lie." She raised her head, bleak shadows filling her dark eyes. "No one else knows, except me. I am a fanatic. But that's

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no justification, is it? If Jonah sends us solid evidence of life on Jupiter—I won't need Europa. Or people like you. The media will love us. We need to keep exploring, Anton. Or we'll stagnate here and die as a species." She looked away. "I am very sorry about your son," she said slowly. "I told you so, and I meant it. It is a bitter coincidence."

"The media will love you for about a week," Anton said absently. Something was bothering him. It was a tremendous coincidence, yes. And cosmic coincidences *did* happen, yes . . . but . . . he let his breath out slowly. "I wish I could say that you're wrong." He looked past her, out to the blue sea where he had gone diving with Elliot and never would again, except in his dreams. "I have instructed my lawyer to request that the injunction be lifted. We are withdrawing our suit against you." Truc had had a fit. "I will sign a release granting you rights to the VR recordings. I won't get in the way of your launch."

"What?" She blinked, hope struggling with distrust in her face. "I'm . . . I'm delighted." She lifted her hands palm up. "What made you change your mind?"

"Jonah." He bowed his head. "And you, partly. You believe in what you're doing. I thought *I* did, too. Now . . ." He gave her a crooked smile. "Maybe you were right. That I have spent my life on vengeance." He turned away from that window full of sea and memory. "Let Jonah go be what you made him to be."

"Anton . . ." She held out her hand. "Thank you," she said softly.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, turned to leave.

"I'll reactivate your chip," she said as the door opened for him. "If you want to visit Jonah. It will let you onto the field to watch the launch, too."

He didn't want to watch the launch, didn't want to see Jonah again. "Thank you," he said politely, and left.

It was time to start a new project. WorldNews was going to be pissed, but he had the final say. That was line one in his contract. So they could bitch all they wanted about not getting the Jovan exposé. He had plenty of possibilities on file.

All science. He smiled crookedly as he entered his virtual Office. Maybe he would try hunting in some other preserve this time. Mail cluttered his virtual desktop. He glanced over it, swept most of it into the trash. One message caught his eye, however. It was from the informant who had sold him his information on the Europa connection.

He didn't need it anymore.

Anton started to file it until he could e-mail a quit message, but he windowed into it instead, curious as to what new info his talented contact had hacked.

"Hope you've got your story ready to go." The Rev's voice sounded in his head. "Europa had a bad day. Several wrong decisions got made by mi-

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nor nodes—who probably wish they were dead if they aren't already corpses. I guess Europa has been teetering on the edge for awhile now, keeping it quiet. It finally leaked. We're talking bigtime economic crash. Europa is pulling in its hundred heads. Which means the wormhole's gonna close. Jovan's gonna get left high and dry. Fact is, I'm kinda surprised they didn't get axed two weeks ago when the whole thing started to come apart."

Anton sat staring at his desktop after the voice ended. So Europa was going to pull its money. Jonah wouldn't get to Jupiter after all. His flash of relief made him wince. He was never going to exorcise Elliot from Jonah. Anton scowled, tugged once more by that nagging sense of *wrong*.

The Rev had been surprised that Europa hadn't pulled their funding two weeks ago.

He had started investigating Jovan Corporation two weeks ago. A feathery chill tickled the back of his neck. More cosmic coincidence? He had picked up the tip on Jovan's connection to Europa from a mediocre source. That tip had been the key that had let The Rev track down the proof. And that tip had just happened to come to *him*—Elliot's father. The one man who might let vengeance take control, and who had the power to trash Jovan.

He accessed Sandra Li.

"I was in a meeting." She raised a wary eyebrow. "What can I do for you?"

"Who shoved me down your throat?" he asked harshly. "It's important."

"Europa, through our intermediaries." She looked away, blushing. "I guess they figured a clean bill of health from you would be the best cover."

Or else they had wanted Anton to do what he had almost done—stop the launch. That chill tickle at his neck was growing worse. "Is the launch still on? No problems with Europa?"

"Yes, it's still on." She looked surprised. "Not even Europa could stop it now. And why would they?" She was getting angry. "Whatever their ethics or lack of them, they are behind this. Don't ask me to walk away from them now. It's too late."

"I hope you're right," he said. "I'll talk to you later. Exit." For a moment or two he sat staring at his Office's wall. She still thought of him as the enemy. Maybe that would never change, either.

Why didn't Europa simply pull their funding? Perhaps a public admission of the Jovan connection would compromise another illegal wormhole.

And maybe Europa was backing Jovan because someone inside believed the way Sandra believed.

The Rev didn't think so, and The Rev hadn't been wrong yet.

The launch was scheduled for tomorrow. Anton wondered if Cam might be able to find something out. Thoughtfully, he went next door.

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The door opened to his touch, unlocked. The room was empty, the holos gone from the shelves and table tops, all surfaces dusted and clean. Anton wrinkled his nose at the prickly scent of anti-viral disinfectant.

Cam had moved out.

Coincidence upon coincidence—that he should get a tip about Jovan, that Cam should happen to be a good enough hacker to get him the proof he needed. It was damned *hard* to crack a private hospital database.

Too many coincidences. Way too many. And he knew Cam from somewhere. Toss that coincidence on to the scale and it went tilt. Anton went back to his apartment and accessed his Office. From there, he e-mailed The Rev with two questions; asap mode: Who really owned Sweet Mercy Hospital, and was there any way for Europa to make any money at all on the shuttle launch or the Jovan project?

He didn't hear from The Rev until just before dawn. The terminal's chime woke him from his uneasy drowse on the sofa. He struggled up out of a nightmare in which giant rays tore Jonah apart with terrible fangs.

What is a soul? Who owns it?

"Access." He fumbled his gloves on. This time, his informant had left him his answer in lines of neat typeface floating on a blue background.

Europa.

Blow it up for the insurance.

Anton stared at the words, cold horror squeezing the back of his neck. Sandra Li would have done it—insured their project. Of course. She was the meticulous type, and she would have spent the money to safeguard her obsession against accident. The shuttle crew would die in the process, but that kind of price had never bothered Europa in the past. So Europa would collect some of the money it needed from Jovan, and any further drain on its assets would end on the launch pad.

Neat scheme.

"Access Sandra Li," Anton rasped. "This is an emergency."

Her image formed, but it was flat and immobile, an icon only. "I'm attending the shuttle launch," she said in the kind of voice you use to leave messages. "I'll be back in my office on Monday morning. If it's an emergency, you can get in touch with the Jovan main office. They will be able to relay a message to me."

Shit. Anton stared at her image, sweat tickling his scalp. "Access Jovan main office," he snapped.

"Hi." A blond man with a young face appeared. "Nobody is here right now, but talk to me, and I'll pass your message on as soon as someone comes in."

Anton exited. Sweating in earnest now, he accessed the media services, surfing through the newslines, one after the other, skipping from knifing to car chase, from murder to mayhem—all the juicy tidbits that kept the

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access percentage up there. But one newsline was doing its community-service bit, offering a schedule of local and regional coming events.

Including a schedule of shuttle launches for the Southern California Regional Trans-Port. A launch was scheduled for two hours from now. When he windowed into that listing, the Jovan Project was listed on the cargo manifest.

"Access fish," he rasped, and wondered if Jonah could connect. "Fish! Jonah? Can you hear me?" No answer, but maybe he could hear and not answer. "Europa needs money," Anton said. "They can get it by blowing up the launch. You are insured. They will collect through Jovan. *Jonah, get out of there!*"

No answer. Anton cradled his head in his arms, tears of frustration burning behind his eyelids. The launch was hundreds of miles away. No way . . . no way to reach him in time.

Well, maybe. He got to his feet, drew a deep breath. If he hired a private jump jet . . . if they didn't get shunted into a minor airfield . . . then *maybe*. Just maybe . . .

"West public landing strip is closed for the next hour," the pilot said. "Shuttle launch." He was young and disdainful, recently military and not very impressed with commercial piloting.

"What happens if you land?" Anton studied the sprawl of the Trans-Port. It was a city unto itself, handling travel all over the globe and up to the orbital platforms as well. "Will they shoot us down?"

"Nah, this isn't anything important." The pilot snorted, faceless beneath his VR flight visor. "I'll just collect a three hundred Pounds International ticket. And my boss will be pissed."

"Give me your reader."

The pilot handed it over without comment. Holding it where he could see the numbers, Anton zipped his card through the slot and keyed in a payment of six hundred PI. Finger poised to enter it in, he looked at the mirrorshade surface of his pilot's visor.

"My boss can be pissed." He shrugged. "Maybe it'll cure his constipation. One ringside seat for the shuttle launch, coming up."

"Thanks," Anton said, and watched his reflected face grin a distorted grin on the curved visor.

He had the door open before the skids had even touched down. His pilot yelled at him as Anton bailed out, but Anton ignored him. He'd spent plenty of time in jump jets and knew to keep away from the jet blast. Fine dust rose in choking clouds and the hot exhaust licked across the scarred pavement, scorching his ankles as he ran for the orbital launch paddock.

The orbitals lifted from the seaward edge of the Port, where they could ditch into the ocean if they needed to. Only one launch was scheduled for

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the day, so Anton headed for the big-bellied orbital crouched on the fire-marked launch ramp. Li could be anywhere. He had a feeling that she would want to oversee everything from the fueling of the shuttle to the loading of the project's cargo pod. He crossed the adjacent paddock at a trot, earning curious stares from uniformed Port employees.

Security wasn't military-grade out here, but he wondered why nobody had intercepted him. Then he remembered the chip. Of course, they were running a constant scan, just to monitor crowd traffic and to make sure that unauthorized citizens didn't wander into the wrong area. Protected by Li's chip, he could go wherever he pleased. Panting, clutching his aching side, he slowed, scanning the bustle of Port employees for somebody—anybody—who might have authority. And who might know where Li was.

The pale blue of a Jovan uniform caught his eye, and he veered toward the trio. The blond man looked familiar. The dark-haired woman, too. He'd interviewed her on his first day at the cove, groped vainly for her name. "Excuse me," he said. "Where can I find Sandra?"

They turned three equally hostile faces toward him. Looked quickly at each other. "I don't know." The dark woman lifted her chin. "Excuse us. We're busy, *Mister* Kraj."

"Damn it, this is an emergency!" Anton struggled for control. "Someone is going to blow up this damn launch. For your insurance."

They stared at him coldly.

"You fucking idiots!" he snarled. Another flash of Jovan blue caught his eye, and he turned, shading his eyes against the sun. Yes, it was Li. And she was talking to someone in a Port coverall. He laughed as Anton watched, head coming up and tilting in a familiar gesture. And then he turned farther, and Anton saw that it was Cam.

Only his name wasn't Cam.

The last puzzle piece fell into place. You could change your eye color, your skin color, your face. It was a lot harder to change the way you moved. Anton spent his life staring at the way people moved as he edited a dozen takes into one seamless whole.

Cam had been arrested on suspicion after a small research facility burned to the ground. Two people had died, and the private organ bank that had catered to the elite under the auspices of a phony research foundation had been incinerated—all proof of illegal activity burned to useless ashes. Anton had still managed to make life difficult for the owners, but Cam—his name hadn't been Cam then—had gotten off. No evidence.

Anton wondered if Europa had had a finger in that pie, or it Cam were merely a popular freelancer. Cam looked up as Anton broke into a run. He said something to Li and then strolled around the corner of the waiting room. "Stop him!" Anton yelled, but a jet was landing on a nearby strip, and she couldn't hear him. "He's a freelance terrorist!" Anton

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grabbed her by the arm as she recoiled. "The man you just talked to. He was pretending to be my neighbor—he's the one who gave me the information about Elliot's VR records. Don't you see? Europa set me up to stop you, only I didn't. Now they'll blow up the launch. You've got to cancel it. There's a bomb on board."

"Stop it." She pushed him away. "You have this rescue fixation, don't you? *Last* time, you jumped overboard and damn near drowned. They'll fine me ten thousand PI if I hold up the launch. If I were you, I'd go visit a clinic. Deal with your dead son, Anton." She turned her back on him. "Besides," she tossed over her shoulder. "If anyone *did* try to get onto the shuttle, or go near it, they'd alert the Port security."

"*I* didn't alert them," Anton said softly. He swallowed, remembering that drunken evening and Cam's fingers on his face. "He copied my chip." The brandy must have been drugged. Cam had used a fast-heal culture to close the site. Hence the puzzling scab. And he had been smart enough to replace the chip after he had copied it. "What did he want?" Anton rasped.

"Nothing, really." For the first time, she looked troubled. "He asked me if I was staying to see the launch." Bitterness drew her mouth down again. "Are you going to pay the fine if I hold up the launch?"

"To hell with the fine!" He wanted to punch her. "Sandra, I agreed to let him go. I meant what I said." Jonah was at least partly Elliot. Can a soul be divided? "This is real. I've been a fucking pawn." His voice trembled, and for a moment he wondered if she might be right—if he were crazy. "Europa has been using me, and my son."

"My God." She pressed her hands to her face for an instant. "How can you do this to me? We're so *close,* and you're asking me to throw it all away. We won't get another chance, because yes, Europa is cutting our funding. You were right. Are you happy?"

She was right. She had no reason at all to trust him. Anton started for the shuttle.

"Goddamn it!" she yelled after him. "I'm calling security!" She turned on her heel and marched toward the control building.

If Cam thought that the launch wasn't going to go, he might blow it up right here on the ramp. Anton slowed, death-fear shivering through his flesh. How would he do it? *Think,* he told himself. Think fast. The shuttle loomed over him, its skin discolored by reentry, offering a thousand good hiding places for an explosive device. He needed a scanner. He needed a working brain. . . . Three figures in Port uniforms were heading purposefully for the shuttle. Security? "Fish," he said desperately.

"Anton?" Jonah sounded sleepy. "What are you doing here?" Pause. "I thought you weren't going to come."

"Jonah, somebody wants to sabotage the shuttle. What would be the easiest way, using the least amount of explosive?"

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"Loading the shuttle schematics," Jonah said in an absent tone. "Lemme look." Three seconds ticked past. Four. "If he blew the fuel line while we were lifting, it would cause the auxiliary tank to blow, too, and we'd come apart into confetti. Did you tell Sandy?"

He sounded worried, but not afraid. Maybe fear of death was the dividing line between human and machine. "I told her," Anton said tightly. "She doesn't believe me. What if he blows it now?"

"It won't do a lot of damage, but it'll do some." Jonah was silent for a moment. "I'm right above the main fuel feed," he said at last. "If it's a big blast, it'll probably fry me. Access to the line is right under me." The security people were running now—three muscular, grim-faced men.

"Where?" Anton said tightly. "I'm about a meter forward of the rear landing gear."

"Go two meters farther back. Look up." Jonah's voice was terse in his head. "There's an access panel for checking a valve—about 15 cm square. It should be locked."

He found it. It wasn't locked. He could feel Jonah above him, feel Elliot's quiet patience as he lay in that hospital bed, plugged into tubes and pretend vacations, waiting for his father to let him die. "It's here," Anton breathed. Such a small thing—a small flat rectangle of black plastic. He didn't see any wires. Footsteps slapped on silocrete. No more time. . . . At the edge of the launch paddock, a Port employee shaded his eyes to stare at Anton.

Cam? He was reaching into a pocket. For a detonator? Anton grabbed the box and stepped away from the shuttle's pale belly. He moved so *slowly,* as if the air had thickened to Jell-O. The security people were almost on him. Throw it, *throw it!* Pivoting—so slowly—he flung it toward the empty paddock next door—felt an instant of relief as it left his hand, because he had won. He had fucking *won.*

He didn't hear the explosion, was aware only of bright light that hurt his eyes, and then an impact like a truck hitting him, or a giant baseball bat.

There was no pain.

Pain came in tiny sharp attacks, like rat teeth gnawing at him. He retreated from it, hiding in the darkness from the pain-rats, curled into himself. But Elliot talked to him, so he wasn't alone. They flew through Jupiter's opalescent sea together, and the rays talked to them without words, and Elliot's happiness warmed him like sunlight.

But after awhile, the darkness shrank. And when it grew too small and thin to hide him anymore, he woke up. To whiteness. He stared at it, groping for meaning in that unfamiliar landscape. Ceiling, his mind finally told him. Walls. Hospital bed. His hand looked unfamiliar on the white spread. But when he tried to move his fingers, they moved. So it

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had to be his hand. Tubes ran from both arms, out of sight behind his head. To a machine. He remembered the machine that had hummed to itself at the head of Elliot's bed.

And he remembered. Jonah. The shuttle's fire-stained belly. Throwing the bomb.

It had been a dream, Jupiter and Jonah's happiness. And grief pierced him, wrung a groan from him. A nurse came in, carrying a big thermal mug with a plastic straw sticking out of it. "How are you feeling?" he said with a smile.

"Did they launch?" The words came out as an unrecognizable croak, and the nurse shook his head.

"Drink this." He held the straw to Anton's lips. "And then you need to sleep."

The mug held juice, sweet enough to make him dizzy, and the nurse fiddled with the machine, and he went to sleep before he could ask any more questions.

But the next time he woke up, Li was there, sitting primly on the chair beside his bed.

"Why are hospital rooms always white?" he croaked.

She raised one eyebrow. "I don't know."

"Where's Jonah?" He struggled to sit up, shocked at the instant tremble in his muscles. "How long have I been here?"

"You've been here almost a month. Jonah is on Jupiter." She turned her head to look out the window.

He had never seen her smile before. It made her almost beautiful.

"You were right," he whispered.

"*We* were right. Wait until you see what we're giving the media!" The afternoon sun slanting through the window turned her skin to gold and glinted in her hair. "They never found out who planted the bomb." She looked down at him again, and with an awkward, almost shy gesture, she reached over to lay her hand on his. "The explosion would almost certainly have damaged or destroyed Jonah. Thank you." She pressed her lips together tightly for a moment. "You sustained some brain damage. That's why you've been here so long."

Brain damage. Anton felt a chill, but everything seemed to work.

"Doctor Mishna treated you. This is a private clinic, and she is a very good neuro specialist. There will be no impairment, and Jovan is picking up the tab." She got to her feet. "I think you were the first genuine friend Jonah had." She looked sad for a moment. "He was never really human to us, but I think he was to himself. And, I think, to you." She paused for a second as if she expected Anton to answer, then shrugged. "When you get out, you can come access Jonah's full transmission." Her smile lighted her face again. "He's having a good time." At the door she paused and looked back. "You were right about public interest waning eventually,"

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she said gravely. "We need to make sure that people *stay* interested." She paused for a moment as if she expected him to say something, then lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug. "I'd like to hire you."

"To do PR?" He blinked.

"More than that." Above her smile, her eyes were anxious. "You could make people understand how important this is—what it means to all of us. I've got plenty of funding now." She looked away from him. "I sold my soul to Europa," she said in a low voice. "Nothing changes that. I'd do it again if I had to."

He closed his eyes, seeing her face as she told him about evolution, about how humanity needed to grow. "Maybe I could work for you," he said. When he opened his eyes, she was gone and the nurse was back, fiddling with the machine and saying rest.

And he did, and he dreamed that he was ghosting Jonah, and they circled a reef, and the reef sang to Jonah without words, only somehow Jonah understood, and some of that song and that understanding filtered into Anton and filled him with the immense and violent beauty that was Jupiter. And the sky wasn't pink, it was another color altogether, and the shimmering air smelled like spring and lilacs and chicken soup, and he and Jonah were happy. Hybrid soul, he thought. Human, machine, and alien.

"You're changing," he said to himself, still half-asleep. "Maybe you're growing up."

About time, he thought, and shouldered lazily back into sleep, diving deep into the swirling seas of Jupiter. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Paul Di Filippo

Surfing the Small Press Wave

I'll be forgiven, I hope, for moving swiftly and perhaps a little too cursorily through the latest flood of intriguing items from the world of small presses. The discerning readers of *Asimov's*, I'm sure, will hop on the wave and snatch up these collectible and rewarding books.

The name of poet David Lunde has graced this magazine before now. From Mayapple Press (PO Box 5473, Saginaw, MI 48603) comes a nicely designed collection of his poems titled *Blues for Port City* (chapbook, unpriced, 20 pages). The conceit informing *Blues* is that all the individual poems, despite their varying voices, are the work of a semi-anonymous individual known as Nulle, a woman of the twenty-second century living and working on Port City, "the domed and tunneled asteroid that served as dock, refitting shop, warehouse and launching point for the Deepships. . . ." From these verses—whose relatively simple diction conceals much craft—waft essences of Delany's *Nova* (1968) and the stories of Cordwainer Smith, particularly "Scanners Live in Vain" (1950). Like viewing a strange world through a lattice whose poem-wide gaps afford only tantalizing glimpses.

Wildside Press (37 Fillmore Street, Newark, NJ 07105) boasts a fine catalog that includes volumes by Greg Bear and Bradley Denton, among others. One of their newer books is Anne McCaffrey's *An Exchange of Gifts* (paper, $7.99, 92 pages). *Exchange* is a curiously wan fairytale that borders on the lands of Harlequin romance. A young lady of noble birth, calling herself Meanne, runs away from home and takes up residence in an abandoned cottage, where she is soon joined by another runaway, a young boy named Wisp. Together they set up housekeeping, learning to relish each other's company without concern for their secret pasts. The mutual forced disclosure of their secrets moves their relationship to a new level, closing out the story.

McCaffrey's story strives to emulate the unique tales of George MacDonald, yet forgets to infuse the core numinous element that powered MacDonald's fables. There is little overt fantasy here, and the simple tale remaining is left rather stranded on a moralistic shoal. The book itself is lovingly and intriguingly designed, with page borders reminiscent of some William Morris volume, though a few typos

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(such as "prick his consequence" for "prick his conscience") have snuck in.

Wildside's publisher is a writer himself, John Gregory Betancourt. *Playing in Wonderland* (paper, $7.50, 96 pages) contains five of his stories, all being homages to several writers. The first two play in Farmer's Riverworld venue, and effectively replicate Farmer's own strengths. The middle two are short pastiches of Frederic Brown and Lord Dunsany. The last, "The Darkfishers," is set on a world crafted by Hal Clement and strikes an appropriate Stephen Baxter note. I missed seeing any credit for the artist behind the neat cover, and a running header from the first story is never updated for the rest of the volume. But aside from these minor quibbles, the collection offers good value.

In 1985 and 1986, a fine small press called Serconia published two volumes of Brian Aldiss's essays: *The Pale Shadow of Science* and . . . *And the Lurid Glare of the Comet*. Now, transmogrified and supplemented, these essays resurface in one volume from a slightly larger establishment, Liverpool University Press (PO Box 147, Liverpool L69 3BX, England), under the title *The Detached Retina* (trade paper, unpriced, 224 pages). Aldiss's criticism is a zesty joy to read. Discerning, empathetic, wry, his writings on writing sprout from the same fertile loam as his fictions. Whether he's turning his electron microscope on individual writers such as Olaf Stapledon, Aldous Huxley, Mary Shelley, or James Blish, or employing a fish-eye lens on SF as a whole ("A Robot Tended Your Remains . . ."; "One Hump or Two"), Aldiss provokes, stimulates, and encourages. The final two pieces are the spice in the soup, providing a peek into his personal beliefs and modes of composition. It's tempting to quote Aldiss's many apothegms, but I'll limit myself to a pair. On Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God": "The world ends not with a bang but a vesper." On Anna Kavan assuming the name of one of her own characters: "Art innundated nature."

If you tossed the works of Norman Spinrad, Jack Womack, and Richard Brautigan into a blender, you might decant the cocktail distilled by Charles Wehrenberg in *WillBall* (paper, $11.00, 203 pages), a publication of SoloZone Press (PO Box 410792, San Francisco, CA 94141). *WillBall* is the story of Barbara Wing and her son Herman, two sacred monsters bestriding a world that at first appears to be our future, but is later revealed to be a skewed-for-satire present. In the world of the Wings, the public is diverted by various deathgames, one of which is WillBall, whose biomonitored players engage in "competitive relaxation." This is Barbara's specialty, while her son engages in more old-fashioned fatal sword duels. Sponsoring the Games is the Clonedyck Corporation, which gets to market the winner's eggs or sperm to status-keen potential parents.

Despite a few contradictory

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patches (the book opens with a fan openly seeking Barbara's autograph after a deathmatch, yet only in Chapter Six are deathmatches seemingly made legal), Wehrenberg deftly sketches with lively prose a society just plausible enough to indict our own. When a character says, "We've become like every Third World country where children are really crops," the reader will inevitably pause and reflect on recent headlines concerning child abuse and infant mortality.

The name and talent of Wayne Wightman deserve to be far better known. Perhaps the publication of *Ganglion and Other Stories* (hardcover, $21.00, 215 pages) by Tachyon Publications (1459 18th Street, SF, CA 94107) will bring him the deserved attention. *Ganglion* is like an all-star classic issue of *Galaxy* magazine in book form. Not that there's anything old-fashioned about Wightman's stories. It's simply that he writes in the grand tradition of Dick, Sheckley, Tenn, and midperiod Silverberg. Modern angsts and ironies are embodied in SF parables laced with that brand of humor best characterized by "the bubble of blood at the end of the laugh." And when an understated change of pace is needed, Wightman is eminently capable of delivering a delicate, Sturgeonesque love story such as "The Face at the End of the Mind," or a spooky one such as the Leiberesque "Life on Earth." One motif that spans the stories is a kind of "body anxiety" verging on disgust, a potent archetypical source mostly for horror fiction. Wightman's characters have a tendency to mutate, lose body parts, and contain aliens within. But it's all in a day's work for the Missouri-born Wightman, who has a stand-in character say, "I grew up in Missouri, see, so weirdness doesn't affect me like it does most normal people."

Black Ice Books is an imprint of Fiction Collective Two (Unit for Contemporary Literature, Campus Box 4241, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790). Perhaps you'd be interested in one derivation of their name. "Black ice was concentrated lung-matter ripped out of the bodies of disease-free crack addicts. . . . The corpse's lungs were processed with various other substances, particularly crack, and remolded into little rock fragments that kind of looked like black hash." That definition comes from Mark Amerika's *Sexual Blood* (paper, $9.00, 187 pages), which wryly defines itself—and all fiction—as resulting from "the instinctive desire to interpolate arbitrary pseudo-autobiographical experiences into collective history's dialogue with itself."

Plainly, Black Ice Books is not your typical staid conglomerate publisher. What they are is an adventurous purveyor of "transgressive" fiction, literary works that stretch the limits of the accepted and acceptable.

Amerika's book is an unbridled gallop across various psychic landscapes of the postmodern world.

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Following the quest of rock musician Maldoror to acquire the "supersonic love energy" known as Sexual Blood, with the help of the shamanistic Medicine Woman and her various avatars, the book reads like a blend of Mark Leyner, Richard Kadrey, and Ishmael Reed. Amerika's inventive, mutant prose can simultaneously chastise, horrify, tickle, and enlighten. If Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* had persisted into the nineties, this is what they would be publishing.

Black Ice has also brought forth a long-orphaned Samuel Delany book. *Hogg* (hardcover, $24.95, 219 pages) is a volume not intended for the squeamish, conservative, or faint of heart. Narrated by a nameless, mute eleven-year-old boy, it details the horrific spree of violence, sexual and otherwise, initiated mostly by the title character. Graphic and gut-wrenching, evoking memories of movies such as *Straw Dogs* and *A Clockwork Orange* (both, curiously, from 1971, the period of *Hogg*'s composition), the novel can be read in several ways. Seen from one angle, it's an indictment of American class, gender, and race structures, a depiction of stuff people are "happier pretending . . . didn't even exist." Seen from another, it's standard gay S&M porn. Seen from a third, it's an explication of phenomena ranging from Serbian rape camps to Rwandan massacres. Finally, it stands as an existential assertion of individual identity in a conformist world.

Written between 1969 and 1973, *Hogg* is a near twin to Delany's more recent *The Madman* (1994) and testifies to his indefatigable and unflinching confrontation with the dark forces of the psyche we deny at our own peril.

The Black Star Never Passes

Crossing Tom Disch's *The Genocides* (1965) with William Tenn's *Of Men and Monsters* (1968), then breeding the offspring with Greg Bear's *The Forge of God* (1987), might result in a story as thrilling and intellectually stimulating as the new novel from Charles Pellegrino and George Zebrowski. But why go to all that work when you can simply pick up *The Killing Star* (AvoNova, hardcover, $22.00, 340 pages; a delux leather-bound edition can be ordered from Easton Press, 1-800-243-5160) and plunge right in?

Without any cozy, hearthside preamble, *Killing Star* drops the adrenaline-charged reader into a scenario of cosmic Darwinian brutality. Inexorable chains of logic (condensed some years ago by Asimov into a new set of three laws that should become as famous as those governing robots) mandate that any intelligent spacefaring race should kill all rivals when possible, rather than run any risk, however small, of being killed itself. Unfortunately ignorant of such logic, humanity has become the latest target of interstellar first-strike selfishness. Having achieved a system-spanning civi-

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lization resembling in some aspects that outlined in Marshall Savage's *The Millennial Project* (1994), mankind is just beginning to feel its oats when the invaders strike.

A fleet of inescapable "relativistic bombs" home in on all radiation emissions and in the space of a few minutes and a few pages, ninety-nine-plus percent of humanity is extinguished. The rest of the novel tells the elaborate cat-and-mouse game conducted between the few remaining separated human parties and the mop-up squad of invaders. (As in Campbell's Arcot, Morey, and Wade tales, the ingenious humans, some employing Intelligence Amplification, push their inventiveness and adaptability to the limits.) This fictional strategy allows the authors to switch between a number of fascinating, hard-edged solar system venues, from the sun's coronasphere to the depths of Neptune.

While the characters are all etched in endearing detail, this is the kind of novel where the fate of any individual matters far less than that of the species as a whole. This treatment can be seen in such incidents as the destruction of the Neptune explorers, where the narrative persists beyond their dissolution to follow the paths of their constituent molecules. Hardly your typical romantic treatment. Such unrelenting clarity of vision and Olympian perspective inform the whole book.

Zebrowski and Pellegrino collaborate gracefully, a kind of Astaire and Rogers in prose. One gets the feeling that Zebrowski did his fair share of the science and Pellegrino a good bit of the sociological details, instead of each man simply concentrating on his own strengths. The text is seamless and moves rather like a relativistic missile itself. The only hitch I encountered was the dozen pages of backstory that begin Chapter 17, which felt a little out of place. But the segue out of the infodump leads directly to two intriguing characters who come to play a large part in the survival of humanity: clones of Jesus and Buddha, no less!

I don't often say these words with any pleasure, but in this case I definitely shall: the book leaves itself open at the end for a sequel, which I hope is not too far off.

Hard Luck Kids

If SF readers are familiar with a Japanese writer named Murakami, it's probably Haruki Murakami, author of the marvelous *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1993) and other slipstream works. But they should definitely get acquainted with another Murakami—Ryu—whose latest novel is *Coin Locker Babies* (Kodansha International, hardcover, $23.00, 395 pages).

Ryu Murakami is a multitalented artist whose books have been bestsellers in his native country. Only three novels have issued from his pen since the first in 1977, but that's because he's also kept busy with his own television show and has directed several films, the most

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notable being *Tokyo Decadence* (1992). His first book, *Almost Transparent Blue,* was an achingly beautiful, prophetic encapsulation of all the motifs that came to be summed up in the word "punk." Reading like *Neuromancer* (1984) without the tech, it was a harrowing, nihilistic account of wasted lives. The second, *69* (1987), was a hilarious, rebellious coming-of-age tale set in Murakami's hometown of Sasebo during the eponymous year.

Given these two divergent works, one could only guess about the nature of *Coin Locker Babies.* It turns out to be more in the mode of *Blue,* but with unmistakeable SF elements and a layer of Ballardian atmospherics.

The first 150 pages or so of the novel constitute an enthralling, surreal, and shocking tale of the abandonment, warping, and partial mental disintegration of two children. Hashi and Kiku are the Coin Locker Babies of the title. Separately, they were abandoned at birth by mothers who left them in train station public storage lockers. Saved and sent to the same orphanage, they exhibit curious traumas induced by their tragic births. Psychiatrists use behavior modification techniques to stabilize them, little knowing that they are laying the groundwork for eventual explosions years down the line.

Adopted together by a naïve couple, the two youths grow up on an island, spending their free time exploring a ruined mining camp whose geography and architecture and inhabitants mirror various psychological contortions. Much in the manner of Brian Aldiss's *Brothers of the Head* (1977), Hashi and Kiku are seemingly inseparable and co-dependent—until teenaged Hashi flees to Tokyo. Following him to the neighborhood known as Toxitown, a contaminated, fenced-off wasteland of hookers and outcasts, Kiku discovers that Hashi has materialized a strange supernatural singing talent. Almost in response to Hashi's evident disinterest in him, Kiku picks up one of his own childhood obsessions—the notion of wiping the Earth clean of humanity, by a method shockingly similar to the recent Japanese subway poisonings—and the paths of the brothers diverge.

At this point, the novel loses a little of its compulsive strangeness. Hashi's path becomes the standard one of rock-star-who-loses-soul-in-the-spotlight, while Kiku comes to personify the misanthrophy caused by humanity's cruelty. While continuing to fascinate and horrify, the book operates on shallower psychic levels from here on.

Yet Murakami's basic theme—that the world is "a huge coin locker," dead and heartless, all its citizens equally innocent, equally culpable—is probed and bodied forth relentlessly till the end. Murakami's prose is always vivid, laced with stunning, grotesque metaphors: consider the description of how Kiku's girlfriend, Anemone, is imagined to have been sculpted in the womb. Murakami's strength of invention is

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unflagging. And the way he weaves the symbols of sea, motherhood, time, and heartbeats is a subtle miracle.

This book should be read and pondered by anyone who has ever felt the slightest compunction for the lost and abandoned ones in this world—or felt a twinge of hatred at the ones who abandon and turn their backs.

A Few Bad Orcs

Comic fantasy has a proud lineage extending back at least as far as Campbell's *Unknown* and the unrivaled team of de Camp and Pratt, and exemplified today by such writers as Piers Anthony, Tom Holt, and Terry Pratchett. And although Mary Gentle's new book, *Grunts!* (Roc, paper, $5.99, 464 pages), seems at first to fall squarely into that tradition, it also possesses a hefty quotient of parody and satire, ranking it with Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* (1972). These two somewhat contradictory modes frequently war with each other in *Grunts!*, resulting in a less than entirely satisfactory reading experience. Still, Gentle deserves credit for her willingness to savage every convention of fantasy literature, and then some.

The world of Gentle's book starts out as the quintessence of Tolkienland. Propelled by their Dark Lord, orcs ravage a landscape of misty mountains, primal forests and southern deserts, populated by elves, men, dragons, and hobbit-like halflings. In the offing is the Final Battle, where either Good or Evil will triumph and rule forevermore. It is at this point that the fantasy train goes off the tracks.

A small team of orcs and halflings is dispatched by "the nameless necromancer" on a mission. The orc leader is one Ashnak, who resembles no character so much as the Checkered Demon invented by underground cartoonist S. Clay Wilson: a lusty, belching monster from the Id. His halfling allies, Will and Ned (evil hobbits!), are brothers prone to dressing in drag, who meet all crises by trying to set diversionary fires. (In a touching moment, Ashnak will eventually marry the brothers' mom, Magda, an ex-hooker, and the unlikely pair will breed halfling-orc spawn prone to eating their babysitters!) In a dragon's hoard, the adventurers discover a cache of strange weapons: AK-47's, Kalishnikovs, and Huey gunships, among other things. There's also a geas on these devices: whoever steals them must become a Marine, more Patton than Patton.

Before the reader can say *semper fidelis*, warfare on Middle Earth is thoroughly modernized. Orcs drill in formation and adopt Sgt. Fury mannerisms. A reporter from *Warrior of Fortune* magazine covers sieges. Soon follow other "improvements." Work stoppages by dwarvish armorers, requisition forms in triplicate, wasteful and insane R&D efforts. After a temporary defeat, the Dark Lord changes his tactics, deciding to run for elec-

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tion to the Throne of the World.

All this mix of incongruities is liberally seasoned with slapstick and silliness. Organizing themselves into squads, most of the orcs opt for a name connoting darkness. An officer complains: "We already have fifteen Black Squads, twelve Dark Squads, four Raven Squads, three Midnight Squads, one Sable Squad, one Ebony Squad, and . . . one Pink Squad. Hmmm. Yes. Well. . . . We're a little worried about Pink Squad. . . ."

And Gentle mangles not only fantasy motifs, but also Vietnam-era fictions such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979). By book's end, even *Starship Troopers* (1959) has taken a direct hit.

But bucketloads of gore and liberal interspersings of the profanity once euphemized by John Sladek as "muller-fokker" interrupt any continuous laughter. Innocents are slaughtered by the cartload in graphic detail, sometimes even to the detriment of the plot, as when a castaway from our world, named Stryker, is foreshadowed to have an important role, only to meet a capricious death. While Gentle succeeds in rubbing the reader's face in the reality avoided by the sanitized warfare of quest novels, she does so at the cost of undercutting the amusement value she so plainly aims for.

Legends in Their Own Time

Every decade or so the SF field needs—and seems to provide—a killer oneshot original anthology in order to redefine and reinvent itself. *Dangerous Visions* (1967) and *Epoch* (1975) come readily to mind. The seminal, landmark collection for the nineties might very well have arrived in the form of *New Legends* (Tor, hardcover, $22.95, 384 pages), edited by Greg Bear and Martin Greenberg. Compiled with a sharp-edged vision of what makes good, reasonably hard SF, yet with a non-doctrinaire approach that allows for a wide variety of voices, this collection contains not a single bad story, and several that are potential classics. Let's look at the majority now, saving the best for last.

"Elegy," by Mary Rosenblum, is one of several pieces that employ a scientist as protagonist. It's an effective dramatization of the link between mankind and the "lesser" species we unthinkingly reap.

The shy Sterling Blake (Gregory Benford in disguise) weighs in with the first of three entries, "A Desperate Calculus," which suspensefully reprises Tiptree's "The Last Flight of Doctor Ain" (1969).

James Stevens-Arce pulls Bergmanesque heartstrings with his "Scenes from a Future Marriage."

Returning to the world of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula K. Le Guin fills in some of the details of Gethenian anatomy and custom. And it's no coincidence, I believe, that the narrator is almost exactly Le Guin's age, lending a kind of personal retrospective nostalgia to the tale.

Benford's second entry (the third

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is a fascinating essay on the interface between real scientists and SF writers) is "High Abyss," which jacks up the Forward-Baxter Strange Environment Contest by detailing life inside a piece of cosmic string!

"When Strangers Meet" by Sonia Orin Lyris reminds me of another Tiptree, namely "Love is the Plan the Plan is Death" (1973).

Robert Sheckley is in top form with his hilarious "The Day the Aliens Came."

"Gnota," by Greg Abraham, conveys the nature of tough choices that must be made in a stratified future. Abraham trusts and proves that the average person possesses deep wells of wisdom that can be tapped when needed.

Playing with some PKD disorientations, Geoffrey Landis plants the reader in the graphic midst of a future invasion of the U.S. in "Rorvik's War."

Robert Silverberg economically limns the heartbreak that can accompany scientific ventures and yet posits a complementary persistence of wonder across the span of several million years, in "The Red Blaze is the Morning."

Similarly, George Alec Effinger details a crisis of faith followed by epiphanical renewal in "One."

And Poul Anderson's "Scarecrow" is a very Asimovian robotics puzzle.

The standouts remain.

Paul McAuley's "Recording Angel" takes place on an artificial strip of a world between galaxies. And that's only the simplest wonder in this far-future melange. Much like his *Red Dust* (1994), this story mixes ancient customs and taken-for-granted superscience miracles into a heady brew.

The much-missed Carter Scholz delivers "Radiance," which intuition tells me is a piece of the novel he's been working on, to be titled *Science Fiction*. Making the stylistic tools of William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon his own, Scholz renders the quotidian life of weapons researcher Phil Quine in luminous thickness.

Finally, the astonishing Greg Egan (see below for more on this writer) takes the themes and basic premise of his exemplary novel *Permutation City* (1994)—in which virtual reality assumed an ontological superiority to analog reality—and pushes it even further, in an alien setting.

It's curious to note trends among any stories presented as a group. The major one I spotted here was in the choice of sciences central to each story. While being somewhat reductionist, I think it's accurate to say that out of fifteen stories, ten dealt primarily with biology (including exobiology), two with physics, one with chaos theory, one with archaeology, and one with cybernetics. This mix represents a radical shift away from traditional hard SF topics, and hints at the shape of SF to come.

Who Goes There?

Over the short space of roughly six years, Australian writer Greg

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Egan has become one of the most ambitious, startling, dextrous writers the SF field can boast of, solely on the basis of three novels and a smattering of supple short stories. (His first novel, *An Unusual Angle,* appeared in 1983. But his most prolific period commenced only in 1989.) Egan is the kind of writer who makes you feel that much of SF prior to his entrance was merely a prototype for what he is now doing. It's the same sensation the Neanderthals must have felt upon the arrival of true *Homo sapiens.*

Now most of Egan's stories—about half appeared originally in *Interzone,* about half in this magazine, and two are originals—have been collected in book form as *Axiomatic* (Millennium, hardcover, £15.99, 289 pages). This volume has the same landmark aura as John Varley's *The Persistence of Vision* (1978) and Orson Scott Card's *Hot Sleep* (1979). A mature, distinctive voice arising out of the monotonous publishing wilderness.

Egan has gained distinction primarily for his "ideas." (The jacket blurb from the London *Times* even bills him "one of the genre's great idea men.") He's prone to taking recent developments in biology, quantum physics, and cybernetics and warping them with rigor and ingenuity into shapes that approach surrealism and the fantastic, earning him a few undeserved brickbats for not being sufficiently loyal to actual scientific plausibility. It's true that Egan's stories all contain amazing scientific conceits. A wandering wormhole from the future plagues Earth in "Into Darkness." In "The Hundred-Light-Year Diary" a mechanism for information transfer from future to past is perfected, radically altering everyday life. In "Appropriate Love" Egan examines the overlooked hitches connected with the popular notion of growing a clone and transplanting one's brain into it.

But two traits have been ignored when people speak of Egan's fiction. The first is easily spotted and amounts to nothing more than the observation that his stories are not mere "blueprint fiction." They're economical, direct, swift, and suspenseful, involving characters easy to empathize with, caught up in mortal dangers. You will use your gut while reading an Egan story just as much as you use your mind, as his characters are wracked by the dilemmas inherent in their strange situations.

The second observation is a little less obvious, but more crucial.

Egan's main subject, whatever the concealing SF apparatus, is a philosophical and metaphysical one: the nature of identity.

With one or two minor exceptions, every story in *Axiomatic* revolves around a character asking himself—usually at the peril of life, limb and sanity—*Who am I?* (From time to time, this question will take the form of *Who can I become?* or *Who is this intimate stranger I love?*)

"The Infinite Assassin" must choose how to define himself when

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confronted with an infinity of doppelgängers. The parents of "Eugene" debate the role of chance and choice in tailoring their hypothetical son. The policeman of "The Caress" finds his identity usurped by a rich madman. In "The Safe-Deposit Box" identity is the hard-won product of sheer determination for a man who is ejected nightly from that day's body. In "A Kidnapping" the identity between cybernetic simulation and original, a prime Egan concern, is debated. In both "Learning to Be Me" and the related "Closer," the Ndoli device, "a jewel inside the skull" of all humans, provokes deep epistemological anxiety.

In short—and in agreement with my own sense that hard SF springs from the same wells as the religio-mystical impulse—Egan uses his fiction to explore the identical mysteries of self that have perplexed navel-gazing astronauts of inner space since humanity's birth. It's a perhaps never-ending—yet endlessly fascinating—quest, and one to which Egan contributes novel and unique insights.

Shoot the Moon

It's plain as a unicorn in a Safeway that John Crowley invented the genre of "urban fantasy" with his monumental *Little, Big* in 1981. That is, until you consider the groundbreaking achievements of Peter Beagle in the sixties. But then again, what about the contemporary fantasies written by Fritz Leiber in the forties and fifties? And wait—who could omit from this list the glorious Thorne Smith and Charles Williams novels of the twenties and thirties?

Whatever ancestors you pick for the type of novel where spooky events proliferate in a magical-realistic way, you're going to have to agree with me that Elizabeth Hand's *Waking the Moon* (Harper Prism, hardcover, $19.00, 390 pages) is one of the standout entries of its kind to arrive in many a year. (Not that well-done specimens are all that common; it's all too easy for such books to degenerate into simplistic farce, neither magical nor realistic.) You'll be reminded of all of the fine authors cited above when you read Hand's book—and be charmed by her own unique voice and concerns, not to mention her sexy, scary, silky, slinky prose stylings.

Waking the Moon is a conspiratorial, fantastical mystery and thriller revolving around the cult of the Goddess: that ancient, world-spanning, many-named deity only partially catalogued and partially understood by such scholars as Robert Graves, Marija Gimbutas, and Riane Eisler.

Hand's conceit is that since the Goddess culture was driven from the globe some twenty thousand years ago by its successor, a constant struggle has been underway to revive it. On one side are the *Benandanti,* a mostly male group, currently holding the upper hand, but always on the alert for what they see as reversion to savagery.

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Their foes are less well organized, decentralized men and women seeking to reignite the rule of the Goddess. Based in Washington, DC, of all places, at the mysterious institution known as the University of the Archangels and St. John the Divine, the *Benandanti* groom each new generation of guardians for their cause.

Into this scene is plunged one innocent young woman: Katherine Sweeney Cassidy, who prefers to be called simply Sweeney. As a freshman in the long-ago year of 1975, she falls in with a set of people (eccentrics as finely etched as Tenniel engravings) who will come to shape the next two decades of her life. Most crucially, Angelica di Rienzi, who happens to be the destined vessel of the Goddess Herself, and the intended instrument for "waking the Moon." Armed with a potent talisman known as a lunula, Angelica will grow in power until she has become Kali Herself.

The book is split into three sections. The first details one brief semester at the Divine, where the alliances and oppositions, friendships and enmities that will govern Sweeney's adult life are formed. The second is a smallish interlude detailing how Sweeney picks up her life after the traumatic conclusion of that semester. The final portion of the novel finds a mature Sweeney marking time, both professionally and personally, until the Apocalypse planned by Angelica begins to unfold and suck her in.

The book is further split by its mode of narration: about two-thirds of the text is Sweeney's first-person story, while the remaining interspersed third views events through the eyes of others. While I understood the necessity for this—to convey pivotal events otherwise inaccessible to Sweeney—I was at first a little wary. With such a set-up, there's always the risk that the reader, having access to insights and information that the main character lacks, will come to view Sweeney as naïve and dumb. But I should have trusted Hand, for she avoids such pitfalls deftly. Parceling out tidbits of esoteric lore with just the right touch, Hand insures that the reader never overtakes Sweeney's understanding.

Hand's portrayal of Washington as the equivalent of Delphi or Ur is unfaltering, producing a magical-realistic portrait of what we envision as that most prosaic of American cities. I missed the pastoral, "sacred grove" atmosphere of the Divine when the action of the book left the university behind. But Hand's portrait of the Museum of Natural History, Sweeney's new employer, was almost as good. And of course, the *Benandanti* have their agents there as well.

Besides delivering a thrilling supernatural conspiracy reminiscent of T.E.D. Klein's *The Ceremonies* (1984) or Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989), Hand has much insightful to say about the New Age, run-with-the-wolves impulses of modern culture. Neither faction in her scenario is wholly endorsed nor wholly condemned. The struggle between them is not the banal

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one of good versus evil, but a deeper, more Jungian one, a schizophrenic war between the necessary opposites that reside within every individual soul.

Lovers and Strangers

In *Celestis* (Tor, hardcover, $21.95, 287 pages), Paul Park succeeds admirably in transferring the atmospherics and themes associated with such dissectors of colonialism as Graham Greene, Nadine Gordimer, and Joseph Conrad into an SF scenario that boasts its own intrinsic share of intriguing speculative matter. He's created a grim and eerie novel of human conquerors warped by their subjugated chattels equal to Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972).

The world created by Park bears a passing surface resemblance to that of the McAuley story discussed above: a melange of High British Empire Frontier Outpost and Perilous Encampment Among Nonhuman Aliens. Settled by exiles from a decayed Earth, the colony world of Celestis also reminds me of the worlds Michael Bishop was once fond of creating in such works as *And Strange at Ecbatan the Trees* (1976) and *Stolen Faces* (1977).

Divided into a night- and dayside, with a marginally creeping terminator, the physical makeup of Celestis mirrors a socio-cultural division: Aboriginals versus humans. Not quite slaves—in some cases, even wealthy—the Aboriginals are still an underclass. Remolded with drugs and surgery, they approximate human looks and mentality. But deprived of their maintenance doses of individually tailored drugs, they soon revert to a shocking otherness, in which their natural pre-contact behavior finds expression only as nymphomaniacal sex.

This is the fate that befalls Katherine Styreme, daughter of a rich Aboriginal industrialist, when she is kidnapped by native terrorists along with human diplomat Simon Mayaram. As the pair struggle to endure captivity and win back their freedom, accompanied by the failed priest Martin Cohen, they fall into a strange *folie à deux,* laced with sexual and racial mindgames. Along the way, they delve into ancient secrets of the planet, mostly involving a supposedly extinct third race, the demons.

Park enriches this already potent fictive compound with analogies to the pre-Mandela South African situation, and with Christian allegories. (For example, the demon race is referred to as "the adversary" by the settlers.) There are even dim echoes, in my reading at least, of the movie *The African Queen* (1951), with Simon a Bogartian streetwise survivor and Katherine (is the name mere coincidence?) a Hepburn-prim example of how easily the thin veneer of civilization is shattered.

Park's portrait of Simon, who is centerstage for almost the whole

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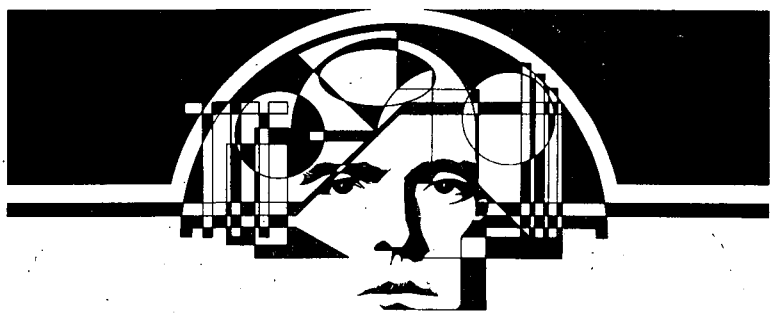
story, is impeccable. Simon's perceptions of this new world—he is one of the few recent immigrants, perhaps the final one, in fact—arise inextricably from his past as a poor child in London. His unthinking, almost reflexive, adoration of Katherine speaks of how lonely his life has been, and seems almost a foredoomed Heathcliffian connection (another Catherine resonance!).

The perpetual challenge-and-response amongst authors that constitutes true science fiction finds a voluble and intelligent participant in *Celestis,* which now sits down at the round table and engages Blish's *A Case of Conscience* (1958) and Jack Vance's less well-known but equally intriguing *The Gray Prince* (1974) in moody and affecting conversation. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

A few new announcements since last issue's press time. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 1996

5-7—**MusiCon.** For info, write: **Box 198121, Nashville TN 37219.** Or phone: **(615) 889-5951** or **(708) 393-3340** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Nashville TN (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Mark Bernstein, Tom Smith. SF and fantasy folksinging convention.

5-7—**NecroCon. (614) 882-9812.** Harley Hotel, Columbus OH. Kailen Mitchell. A low-key "relax-a-con."

5-7—**SunQuest.** Sheraton Plaza Florida Mall, Orlando FL. SF, fantasy and other miniatures gaming.

12-14—**Arisia. (617) 371-6565.** Park Plaza, Boston MA. Emma Bull, Will Shetterly, Lisanne Lake, Bob Bazemore.

12-14—**ChattaCon. (404) 578-8461.** Radisson Read House, Chattanooga TN. Walter Jon Williams, Charles De Lint.

12-14—**TropiCon. (305) 524-1274.** Doubletree, Ft. Lauderdale FL. James P. Hogan, Mike Resnick, Hal Clement.

12-14—**RustyCon. (206) 248-2010.** Sheraton, Tacoma WA. Guests to be announced.

12-14—**ConFusion. (313) 429-3475.** Hilton, Novi MI. M. P. Kube-McDowell, Bob Eggleton, Melody Asplund-Faith.

12-14—**EveCon. (301) 292-5231.** Holiday Inn, Francis Scott Key Mall, Frederick MD. Gaming and "weirdness."

12-14—**ConFurence.** Atrium Marquee Hotel, Irvine CA. Anthropomorphics/furries/funny animals in all media.

12-14—**Dreamation. (718) 881-4575.** Holiday Inn, Elizabeth NJ. Live-action role-playing and other gaming.

12-14—**A Gathering of Gamers. (520) 624-7423.** Convention Center, Tucson AZ. A general-purpose game meet.

19-21—**Legacy, c/o O'Gara, 10854 Hwy. 98 W., Pensacola FL 32506.** Theme: "SF & Horror: The Art and Writing."

19-21—**RQ Con, c/o 48 Barcelona, Box Hill VIC 3128, Australia. (03) 899-8539.** Bayswater School. Role-play games.

26-28—**Mutagen, GPO Box 910G, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. (03) 534-2752.** Eden on the Park. Telefantasy.

FEBRUARY 1996

2-4—**CremeCon, Box 37986, Milwaukee WI 53237. (414) 223-3243.** Manchester East Hotel, Glendale WI. Watt-Evans.

2-4—**UK Nat'l. Filk Con, 212 Albert Rd., Leyton E10 6PD, UK. (44 0 1223) 777-291.** Milton Keynes. SF folk music.

2-4—**Norman Conquest, 215-A, OMU, Box 304, 900 Asp Ave., Norman OK 73019. (405) 325-9583.** Star Trek, gaming.

2-4—**VidCon, c/o D. Lynne, 12524 Lovers Lane, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347.** Tampa FL. Adult zine fans.

2-4—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219.** Radisson Inn. Gaming with a Star Trek slant.

2-4—**Potlatch, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 232-1727.** Imperial Hotel. Small con for written-SF fans.

8-11—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660.** The sixteenth annual outing for this Chicagoland institution.

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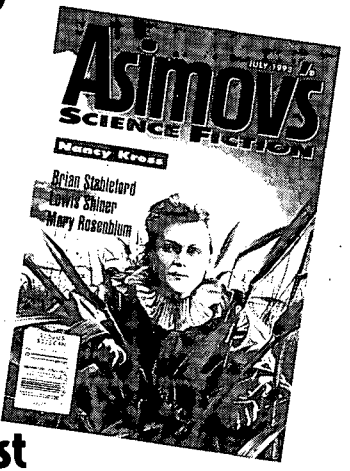

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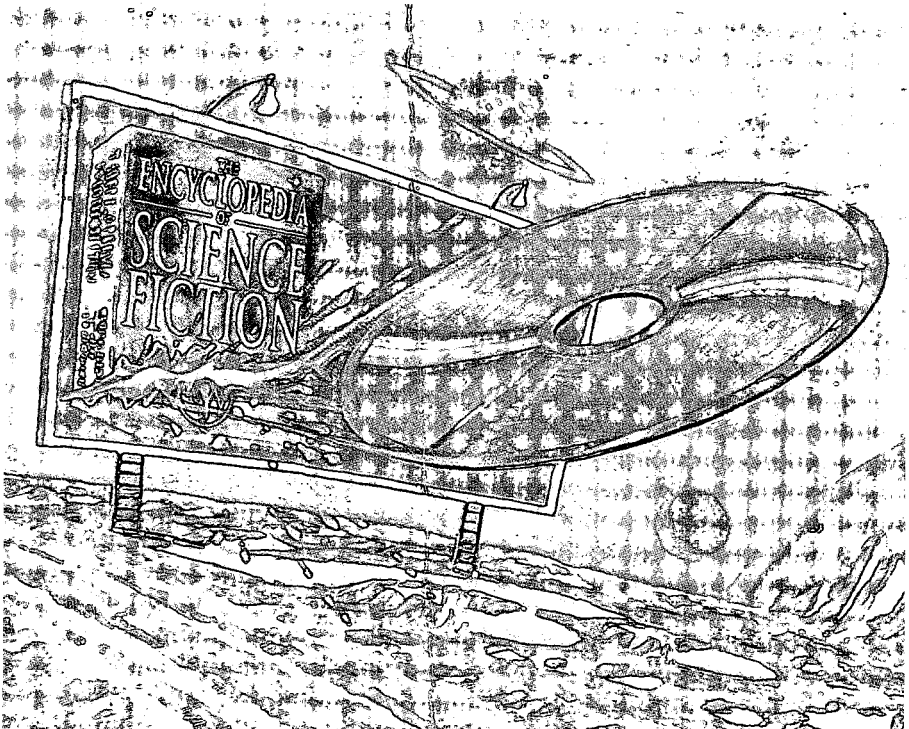

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